櫻子さんの
足下には
死体が
埋まっている
わたしのおうちはどこですか
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# First Bone: Where is My Home? Part 2

## Part 7

One of Kamifurano's famous spots is Roller Coaster Road. Officially it's called Nishi 11sen Doro. It's a long, straight road with a bunch of steep hills going up and down, so it's like a natural roller coaster. Now there's a "New Roller Coaster Road" in the Nishi Kagura area of Asahikawa.

It's not a super well known tourist spot, but it's in a hilly area near Asahikawa Airport, and called Nishi Kagura Shuujitsu Hill. It runs through a mosaic of colourful fields, and mature trees. It has the same steep hills, but since there aren't any tourists there, it's nice and quiet. Autumn is the best time to go. It's comfortable, and most importantly, the fall colours are gorgeous on the Tokachidake mountain range.

It was just last week that I was talking about all this with Kougami, completely unaware of what would happen to her.

"…This would have been fun if we were just going for a drive," I mutter as I watch the scenery pass by through the window of the silent car.

"What's fun about just driving?" Sakurako-san says with no expression on her face.

A bitter smile forms on my lips before I know it. I wonder what colour the world reflected in her eyes is . Not that a colour would have any value or meaning to Sakurako-san.

"But it's a holiday, we should do something fun."

“We can have fun another day,” Sakurako-san says expressionlessly, as usual. Or rather, she seems distracted. I guess Ii-chan’s disappearance is reminding her of what happened to Soutarou-kun. Looking at her face in profile makes my chest feel cold, so I move my gaze.

I’ve ridden my bike on this road countless times. I never imagined that I’d drive along here with Sakurako-san due to a situation like this.

“…It’s always strange. Everyday life just continues on while there’s people out there involved in criminal activity and in need of help.” Where exactly is the line drawn between the ordinary and extraordinary?

This road has almost no traffic lights. As I look out at the larch trees dyed yellow and orange, I think about Kougami and Ii-chan. I wonder if they’re safe. While I feel anxious about it, I have a strong feeling that Phantom wouldn’t hurt them. Still, there’s no guarantee that the evil butterflies working for him won’t hurt them.

The Tominaga family and Kougami both received wings from different butterflies. There’s probably more than one criminal. Someone represented by a moth is after the Tominaga family, and someone represented by an ominous butterfly is after Kougami. We have to save them as soon as possible. I pull out my phone and open the map. A look at the satellite image to try to find the spot where they might be held at.

“Over there… Turn down that narrow road just past the larch trees. There’s a building that seems off.”

A thin road breaks up the fields. The map shows several houses with dull coloured roofs between the trees. The road is bumpy and uneven. Along the way, I notice a lot of trees have been knocked down. Must have been from a typhoon. Before long, the single-story house, cow barn, silo, and rusty old truck come into view.

“…” Sakurako-san immediately stops the car and gets out, trying to make as little noise as possible. I quickly do the same.

“Please be careful,” I whisper.

She nods. I look at the ground. There’s tire tracks from a car other than ours. The weather has been nice lately, so the ground is

dry. Neither of us can tell how old the tracks are.

“They look pretty new to me…”

She nods, and says she thought the same. I notice another set of tracks.

“These look like they’re from an ezo deer.”

For a second I thought they could be Ii-chan’s… But looking closer, they’re definitely not from a human. I’m all too familiar with these footprints that look like two peanuts lined up side by side. I’m good at telling deer tracks apart, since my mountain grandpa taught me about them. It’s especially easy in Hokkaido, since there aren’t any wild boars.

The tire tracks continue a bit further, so we follow them. A flock of birds fly across the gloomy sky, like they’re hurrying back home. Are they jungle crows, or carrion crows? I want to hurry up and save those two, so they can go home, too. Eventually, we find the end of the tracks. They stop right in front of a rundown house. Unfortunately, there’s too many dead leaves on the ground to see any footprints.

“Ah…”

Before we can reach the abandoned house, a large orb weaver spider’s web blocks our way. It must be around 3 centimetres. I haven’t seen one that big in a long time.

“I guess nobody has been here… Oh, but my mountain grandpa once said that orb weavers can build a web in as little as 30 minutes.”

“It’s true that they can build a web quickly, but they usually hide during the day and build webs at night. If they built them during the day, they’d be eaten by birds.” Sakurako-san speaks quietly.

This must have shown up after it got dark, then. After taking a closer look, I notice several spiders in their webs around this house. It’d be hard to enter without destroying any of them.

“…Maybe this place is just a bunch of ruins.” Perhaps we were supposed to go to the Roller Coaster Road in Furano, rather than Asahikawa.

“!” Just then, I get a light feeling like something flapping its wings behind me.

“…”

After turning around in a panic, I find it's just a fallen leaf, rather than a butterfly. I can't help but let out a sigh of relief.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, just for a second I thought there was a—"

Just as I'm turning back, I see a small light flash in my eyes. I thought it was just my imagination. Even if I did see something, it was probably just some trash left behind by the previous owners. Curious, I turn back just a bit, and see the same white light.

"…This is Kougami's."

A thin necklace is hung on a branch. There's a white, glass piece that looks like a konpeito candy. There's no mistake. I bought this for her as a souvenir when I went to Abashiri. It's been doubled over, and fastened tightly to the branch of a thick shrub. It was hard to notice at a glance since it's so low down. No matter how I look at it, it couldn't have been accidentally caught here. It had to have been left on purpose. I immediately answer my own question about why. The shrubs and tall knotweed hide it, but if you look closer, there's a path behind here.

"Sakurako-san!" I call her over, then we proceed down the hidden path.

It might be a trap, but Kougami definitely left us a message. I wish I'd remembered to bring my rescue tool that I got with the money I earned from mowing lawns during the summer.  I wonder if it violates the Swords and Firearms Control Act to carry it around with me, though… I keep it in my desk at home with that in mind.

Sakurako-san doesn't have her backpack that she usually brings when she's looking for bones today. A knife would be nice to cut through the branches in the way. Knives have other uses, though. Using a weapon to protect someone means harming someone else. When I think about it like that, it's for the best if I don't have a knife in my hands. I don't have the courage to be responsible for that kind of power.

After a short walk on what can barely  be called an animal trail, the path opens up. It just leads to an unused barn. Given the rusty farming tools scattered around, it must have been a tool shed at some point. With the roof caved in at several spots, it's clearly not in

use anymore. There's no windows, so we can't see inside. I hold my breath, and silently peek through a crack in the wooden wall.

"…!"

Inside the cramped, dilapidated shed with lumber strewn about is a single girl, tied to a chair. Her head is down and she's wearing a blindfold, but there's no way I could mistake that silky black hair.

"Kougami!"

I accidentally let out a shout. She raises her head, surprised, and searches for me despite not being able to see.

"Tatewaki-kun…?"

Luckily, Kougami appears to be the only one inside. I'm not sure about the shadows behind the lumber, but I don't think there's enough room for anyone to hide. Still, Sakurako-san grabs my shoulder from behind for a moment. I shake her off, and rush over to Kougami to take off her blindfold.

"Kougami! I'm so glad!"

She smiles at me with tears in her eyes. "Tatewaki-kun…"

"Are you hurt? Did… Did they do anything to you?"

At a glance, she doesn't look like she's injured, and her clothes don't seem messed up. She shakes her head.

"That's good."

"I knew… That you two would come," Kougami says. Her voice is strained from crying.

Just hearing those words makes all the effort worth it. Well, I guess it's arrogant for me to think that, since I didn't actually do anything.

"Hold on, I'll untie you."

She was tied up using a thin hemp rope. Her skin looks red and painful. What a terrible thing to do… I reach for the knot, but Sakurako-san stops me.

"Sakurako-san?"

"Wait."

"What?"

Poor Kougami is tied to a chair. I want to let her free as soon as possible, but Sakurako-san wants me to step away? Why? If Sakurako-san says so, there must be a good reason.

“Yuriko, how long have you been tied up?”

“Since this morning… Ever since I sent that message to Tatewaki-kun.”

“…I see.”

Sakurako-san gently brushes the dust away, then kneels on the ground. I can see painful-looking scratches on her legs.

“Sakurako-san?”

“Have you been alone this whole time?”

“Sometimes the criminal comes by…” Kougami says with a downcast look.

“Have they given you anything to eat or drink? What about going to the bathroom?”

“Huh? Um… I went when the criminal came by…”

Sakurako-san examines Kougami’s legs, then stands up with a grim expression. “I’m sorry, but we can’t untie you right now,” Sakurako-san says, crossing her arms.

“…What? W-what are you talking about?! If we don’t do it now…”

“Despite being tied up for a long time, her legs aren’t swollen. If you’ve really been tied up for 6 hours, you might have economy class syndrome. When you sit in the same position for a long time, blood doesn’t flow to the legs as much, so there’s a high risk of getting a blood clot. Economy class syndrome is when you move too suddenly, and the blood clots block your pulmonary arteries. More accurately, it’s referred to as an acute pulmonary embolism.”

I’ve also heard it called  traveller’s thrombosis. I saw in the news recently that someone who was living in their car while escaping a natural disaster died from that.

“And you think Kougami has it?”

If it’s a possibility, then it would be dangerous to untie her, like with crush syndrome. But Sakurako-san shakes her head.

“It doesn’t look like it. It’s not a guarantee, but her legs don’t look swollen.”

“Huh?”

“She would have had to have been untied so she could get a drink and go to the bathroom, but it doesn’t look like the rope was re-

tied at all.” Sakurako-san puts her hand on my shoulder and says, “you can’t.”

“But… Why?! Explain it so I can understand!” Kougami pleads with tears in her eyes. Of course she’d be upset.

“She’s right. You have to help us understand.”

“No means no. You can’t untie her. Don’t make me say it again. Yuriko, I’m sorry, but I can’t trust you right now,” Sakurako-san says in a cold voice with an irritated expression forming on her face.

“What are you talking about?! It’s Kougami!”

Kougami hangs her head and quietly sobs. It’s just unreasonable to say she can’t be trusted. I understand that Sakurako-san is being careful for Ii-chan’s safety as well, though.

“But it doesn’t look like she’s been restrained for several hours. It’s unnatural.”

“Unnatural…”

Kougami’s legs are a bit scratched up, but there’s no large bruises or dirt or anything. Even if she was blindfolded, wouldn’t she still try her best to escape from her restraints? Still, it’s Kougami. I’m sure she was just waiting for the right moment to try to escape, or maybe she truly did believe in us and was waiting.

“…Even so…” Kougami speaks in a low voice, her head still hanging down. “Even so, you’ll have to untie me if you want to save her… You already know that I’m the one who took Ii-chan, don’t you?”

“…Huh?” I don’t understand what she’s saying right away.

Kougami slowly lifts her head, and in the dim lighting, I see a harshness I’ve never seen from her before. The look in her eyes says she’s challenging us.

“Honestly, my legs hurt so bad even though it’s only been an hour… I should have asked them to tie me up with a less painful rope.”

“Where is the child?”

“…”

Sakurako-san speaks sharply and intimidatingly, but Kougami just turns away from her and refuses to answer.

“Speak,” Sakurako-san says sternly, forcing Kougami to face in her direction.

“Ii-chan is safe, but depending on you two, she may not stay that way,” Kougami reluctantly answers. “So untie me please,” she urges us.

Sakurako-san just glares at her for a moment, but soon resigns herself to untying Kougami. I help by untying both her hands and left leg while Kougami unties her right leg by herself. Sakurako-san and I wait impatiently for her.

“It’s nice that it’s not too hot at this time of year,” Kougami says, looking up at the sky through the collapsed sections of the roof. She takes a plastic bottle out of the bag behind her chair.

It’s the time of day when you’d start turning on the lights. The time when you can’t see another person’s face clearly. The time of the dog and the wolf.

“…Why did you do it?”

Kougami ignores my question. Anger starts welling up inside me. How could she make me worry like this? Kougami doesn’t care at all about how I’m feeling. She walks past me and hands the bottle to Sakurako-san. It’s a 250 mL sports drink type of bottle.

“Please drink the whole thing. It’s sweet, so I think you should be able to handle it.”

“What is it?”

“Sleeping medicine. Now that my cover is blown, you have to drink it.”

“I refuse.”

Of course she’d refuse, yet Kougami pushes the bottle into Sakurako-san’s chest.

“No, you have to drink it. It’s a Charles Dawson recipe. The effect isn’t immediate, so it’ll take about 15 minutes to fall asleep… Don’t worry, I won’t hurt you. If you want to save Ii-chan, do what I say,” Kougami says with a dark, detached expression.

“…” Sakurako-san glares at her, but there’s no helping it. She puts her hand on the cap.

“Sakurako-san!”

“If we want to save the child, we have no choice but to obey.”

“But…”

There's no reason for us to believe that the medicine just makes you fall asleep. Sakurako-san puts the bottle to her lips. She takes a sip at first. I thought it might be bitter, but she soon drinks the whole bottle at once.

"…Are you happy now?" Sakurako-san turns the bottle upside down to prove that it's empty.

"Yes, thank you very much. Also, there's a web camera up there. We'll be watching you, so don't do anything unnecessary, Tatewaki-kun." Kougami glares at me distrustfully. She takes Sakurako-san's hand and leads her to the chair where she was tied up. "Please sit down."

At least Sakurako-san isn't being tied up. Not only does she have Ii-chan as a hostage, but now she has Sakurako-san.

"Before I fall asleep, tell me how and why you took Yuuka," Sakurako-san sits back in her chair and crosses her legs.

"The kid isn't my real goal. It's just… A bit of give and take. I'm cooperating with *her* to get what I want." Kougami grabs an LED camping lantern from the rubble. "By her, I mean the woman that Yuuka's father is having an affair with." I can see Kougami's blank expression now, thanks to the blue-ish white light of the lamp. "This wasn't the first time that Ii-chan had secretly gone for a walk on her own. Her mom just didn't notice. That's why I was waiting by her house today."

Usually, even if the woman from the affair approached Ii-chan or tried to give her candy, Ii-chan would refuse and run away. The woman chose Kougami to help her get close to Ii-chan.

"I told her that I'd play with her until noon so her mother could focus on cooking."

"Why are you doing this now?"

"It's okay, she's sleeping from the medicine, so she isn't scared. That woman's goal doesn't involve hurting the kid, she just wants to take over that family."

"Take over?" I accidentally let my discomfort show in my voice.

Kougami smiles slightly. "That's right. She wants to expel the current mother of the family, and become the new 'mom.'"

"But that's…"

Milliona basalis - a greedy moth that slaughters the trees that give them shelter, stripping them bare and withering them. That must be the reason she's that ominous moth. However…

"You're right, that kind of thing is normally impossible. In order to make it possible, she begged 'you know who' and enlisted my cooperation. Then, all I had to do was lure you out here."

Kougami's mention of "you know who" leaves Sakurako-san more anxious than the rest of her words.

"—Hanabusa."

"That's not his name. I call him "The Swallow.'"

The kind, good natured swallow. Different from the cold hearted butterflies in that poem.

"…Then posting that piece in the newspaper really was the trigger, after all."

Kougami narrows her eyes, but doesn't deny it.

"Be quiet for a while. I have to do some important work right now, so stay quiet, Tatewaki-kun."

"…Why?"

Why? How could you do this? You, Yuriko Kougami, who's kinder than anyone.

"Well, because I hate you, I guess."

"…Huh?"

She says it so casually, like she's talking about the weather today. I'm so shocked that my vision blurs.

"No… But you've always been so nice to me. Making me lunch, having tea together, putting hand cream on for me…"

She scoffs and turns away coldly, saying she just didn't want to waste her expensive cream.

"Don't you get it? I only hung out with you to get close to Sakurako-san! I only made the lunches to give Sakurako-san and gran a good impression of me… I've always hated it. I wish the person by Sakurako-san's side was me, instead of you."

She squeezes the lantern against her chest and digs her nails into it. I can see her shadow on the wall trembling with anger.

"Every time I think of my grandma, I think that if I were in your shoes, things could have been different. She could have survived."

“But at least we found out that she didn’t commit suicide!”

“That’s right, she wanted to live. If I had helped her more, then maybe now she would-“ Teardrops fall from Kougami’s eyes.

“Kougami…”

She wipes the tears away with the back of her hand, then turns toward Sakurako-san. Sakurako-san is starting to talk less, and she’s leaning back against the chair with a drowsy look in her eyes.

“…Hey, Tatewaki-kun? Don’t you think justice is imposing? It’s just pushy.”

Justice is a belief. Phantom said the same thing as Kougami before.

“You always think you’re right. You always try to fit in, never say anything other people might not like, always trying to be a good person… Like you think you’re better than everyone else. If you didn’t have Kujou-san, you’d be as helpless as a mouse to a fox,” Kougami spits out. She looks down at a dried up mouse corpse at her feet. Her words are harsh to the point where it sounds unnatural and forced.

“This doesn’t sound like you, Kougami. If you’re in trouble or worried about something, I can help you.”

I get the feeling that she’s trying to provoke me. I have to be patient and persistent. Something about this isn’t right. I’m sure someone is manipulating her. Either Phantom, or the mourning cloak butterfly.

“Don’t listen to the people who are just trying to use you.”

I grab onto Kougami’s wrist tightly. She tries to break free, but I don’t let go. She’s trembling.

“Please rethink this.”

“…”

“The three of us have to put our heads together to help save-“

Kougami wraps her free hand around my neck.

“Kou…!”

“I’ve… Actually liked you for a long time, Tatewaki-kun.”

“Huh?”

She presses her body against mine. She’s thinner than Sakurako-san, her bones are digging into me in some places. Her

shampoo smells different from normal. Her cold cheek presses against the nape of my neck.

“What are you talking about?! I mean-“

Imai likes her. I try to push her off of me, but a cold, inhuman force pushes back.

“But I hate you a lot more than I like you. You want to help me? What can you even do? I hate you the most, out of everything in this world.”

I try to gulp. Kougami is pushing something sharp against my throat.

“Don’t move… The more you use a palette knife, the thinner the edge gets… Until it’s sharp like a razor…. My grandpa used to cut his hand on it from time to time. It’s up to you to decide whose skin I push this knife into.”

“This… Isn’t right.”

“What do you mean? I can be bad if I have to be. I don’t need you to protect me. I wish I could trample over the flowers growing in your head.”

A stifled, malicious laugh escapes her lips. It’s similar to Sakurako-san’s laugh. Rather than fear or anger, I find Kougami’s look of contempt pitiful, and almost funny. I can tell she’s desperately trying to imitate Sakurako-san.

“I think you should calmly think this over again.”

“I’ve thought it through countless times! I’ve thought about it too much! But my life ended with my grandma’s death. I might as well be dead already. I’m not afraid of anything anymore.”

She says she’s not afraid, but her left hand that’s still holding the palette knife to my neck is trembling. She’s clearly scared, so why? Why lie and say she isn’t?

“I understand, so put the knife down. We don’t need weapons to have a discussion.”

“We’re not going to discuss anything. You don’t understand, Tatewaki-kun… do you? Everyone around you loves you. Sakurako-san’s family and Isozaki-sensei clearly show favouritism toward you. Your mother, your grandparents, and your brother are all on your side… But I… I don’t have anyone!”

“Kouga—!”

As she raises her voice, a cold, prickly pain runs down my neck. I feel the same fear boiling in my stomach as when I got stabbed in Hakodate.

“Wait! If you stab me now, it’ll ruin your plans. Right?”

I desperately try to keep my fear in check long enough to calm her down.

“I don’t care what happens. I’m… seriously not afraid to kill you. It doesn’t matter what happens to the plan. As long as I can make you aware of that, that’s all I care about.”

“That’s your whole plan, Kougami? That’s all you followed Hanabusa- the person I call Phantom and you call The Swallow - for?”

“Leave me alone! What do you know about happiness?! No matter what I do, these feelings of guilt, like I can never forgive myself, keep building up and churning around inside of me!” Kougami’s voice roughens.

Luckily she’s thrown the knife on the floor out of anger without harming me.

“Then tell me! Tell me everything until I understand! We can think about this together. If you say you have nobody to protect you, then I’ll do it.”

“I can’t do that! Your sense of justice is all talk, and you let others influence you too much.”

“Then what about the other butterfly? The black butterfly. The mourning cloak.”

I feel a twinge of jealousy when I remember the dark, mourning dress coloured wing from her desk. She trusts this “mourning cloak” person more than me, even though we see each other every day. Kougami laughs lightly.

“That’s me.”

“…What..”

“I’m the mourning cloak butterfly.”

“No way…”

Hanabusa is the one who gives criminals their butterfly-related nicknames, and sets them to kill others. He only gives nicknames to

people who are already evil, or could be if pushed.

"That can't be true!"

"…What makes you think that?"

"I already told you! It's because I trust you, Kougami!"

Kougami laughs and pulls herself away from me. She picks up the knife, slides it into a leather case, and puts it in her bag. She gives me a cold stare. I suddenly hear the sound of a car approaching.

"Sakurako-san seems to be fast asleep. It's all up to you now, Tatewaki-kun. At least you're good at showing off and making good arguments."

Kougami smiles as she spits those harsh words with the same beautiful face and voice I've always known. The wound on my neck stings.

## Part 8

I hear the sound of someone approaching, and see the circular light from a flashlight shining in.

"Kanae-san," Kougami greets the approaching, shadowy figure.

Then, she gives me a knowing look. She's telling me that this "Kanae-san" is the Milionia basalis. When I first heard about the woman Ii-chan's dad was having an affair with, I imagined she would be a frivolous person. Apparently my imagination was wrong. She's wearing a modest, grey dress and thick framed glasses. She has semi-long, black hair. When I saw her from afar, she looked much older than Souta-san. Seeing her now, closer and in the light, she's actually much younger. Probably in her mid-20s.

"Good… Looks like it went according to plan," Kanae-san lets out a sigh of relief.

"It did, so let's move onto the next phase. Tatewaki-kun, we'll need your help carrying Sakurako-san to the car," Kougami promptly gives me instructions.

I try to object, but her glare stops me. Her looks says "do you want something to happen to Ii-chan?" It would be nice if I were fine with hurting others to protect Sakurako-san, but I just don't have it in

me. If I let something happen to Ii-chan, it would be the same as if I never came to help her. Plus, Sakurako-san sees similarities between Soutarou-kun and what's happening to Ii-chan right now. She wants to be able to protect that tiny life this time. If I let something happen to Ii-chan… I have no other choice.

As Kougami told me, I take Sakurako-san to Kanae-san's car, then she puts a blindfold on me. Since I can't see, my sense of time is off. I just listen to the sound of the car's engine, and think of Diavel's song DOKURO. The song is just under 5 minutes, so I can track the time that way. Just as I start the second repetition, the car stops. I was blindfolded for about 5-6 minutes, which would mean we're roughly around the Biei airport area… Fortunately, they take the blindfold off right away.

"Where are we?"

"It doesn't matter."

They let me out of the car, and make me carry Sakurako-san again. It looks like another abandoned house. It's surrounded by tall coniferous trees, and looks to be on a mountain. It reminds me of the Nishikagura area, but I'm not exactly sure.

"Careful… Be gentle."

I carry Sakurako-san into a barn that's smaller than the one we were at before. Kanae-san unlocks the door, so Kougami helps me carry Sakurako-san inside. There's a blanket spread over a mattress, with Ii-chan laying on top.

"Is Ii-chan okay?"

"Yes. She should wake up soon, but she can't go home yet."

We lay Sakurako-san down next to Ii-chan. Kougami sighs with relief. She gently pets Ii-chan's hair.

"...I may have locked her up, but I don't want to hurt her."

"I think she's been hurt enough."

She was kidnapped from her home, put to sleep against her will, and kept in a place like this. Physical injury isn't the only way people can be harmed.

"That's a cute pin," Kougami says, changing the subject and ignoring what I said

She's talking about the hairclip Ii-chan is wearing with a little strawberry decoration on it.

"That woman is using her as a tool for keeping her husband around, so of course she has to look good. She also has to show off to everyone that she's a compassionate woman who loves her adopted daughter," Kanae-san says in a small voice, though her words are still full of poison.

"You're wrong. It's for the birthday party."

It's her little brother's birthday. What's wrong with wearing cute clothes on a special day?

"I'm not wrong. Who goes out of their way to invite other people to a birthday party for such a young child? They don't even understand yet. That woman was just doing it for her own satisfaction."

"You don't think Haruku-kun will be happy to see pictures of people celebrating for him once he is old enough to understand?"

She's ruining his birthday with her absurd, one-sided feelings. I find myself glaring at Kanae-san without realizing. Kougami jabs me with her elbow.

"More importantly, take off your sweater."

"Why?"

"The door rattles so the wind gets in through the openings. Those two will get cold."

"Huh? What about your coat?"

"I'll be cold without long sleeves on."

"But it's fine if I'm cold…"

She should just use her own jacket if she's that worried about it. She's right that it'd be bad for the two of them to get sick from the cold, so I take off my hoodie and give it to Kougami. Kougami carefully covers Ii-chan and Sakurako-san with it. After leaving the barn, Kanae-san puts a padlock on the door.

"Locked from the outside…. There's nothing they can do to escape…" I accidentally mutter out loud.

"There's no other choice," Kougami says. "It'd be bad if Ii-chan woke up and actually got lost this time, wouldn't it?"

"I guess so…"

“I got Sakurako-san’s car keys,” Kougami calls out to ‘Kanae-san.’

Kanae-san takes the key, but gives Kougami a puzzled look.

“I thought it would be better if we switched cars. Someone might have already reported your car as being suspicious. We can just get it after, right?”

“Yeah, you have a point.”

They put a blindfold on me again, and we arrive at the first barn again. We move from Kanae-san’s car to Sakurako-san’s. They told me to take the blindfold off, but Kougami is still sitting next to me to keep an eye on me. I usually ride in Sakurako-san’s passenger seat, so it feels weird to be in the back.

“So… What do you want me to do?”

“Your job is to call that person, without tipping off the police.”

“Why ‘that person’?”

I know that she means Naho-san. What are they planning to do to her once she’s here?

“You already know, don’t you? She’s making both him and I unhappy. I’m going to convince her to get a divorce.”

“Convince…?”

Doesn’t she mean “threaten”? I have to bite my tongue to keep from saying anything. Kougami stares at me.

“It’s all that woman’s fault. She’s making him unhappy,” Kanae-san continues. Her voice is monotone, but sinister. “She put him through so much hardship because she couldn’t get pregnant, then she took in these kids, then she suddenly did get pregnant… Who can even say if it’s his baby or not?”

“But-“

She’s completely delusional.  Kougami looks out the window, pretending not to listen.

“He’s suffering. That woman doesn’t love him or those children. She only cares about her own happiness and having an ‘ideal family.’ She’s like that black moth, devouring her adopted children and her husband.”

The city after sundown is reflected in her dark eyes. Honestly, I don’t think Naho-san is the kind of person that Kanae-san thinks she

is. But before I can object, she keeps ranting.

“She betrayed him first. She lied to him about her parents.”

I heard that Naho-san didn’t have a very good home life as a kid. Souta-san doesn’t seem to know the details, either, just that she’d struggled a lot. Her parents didn’t attend their wedding. She said that they both died. Naho-san’s former teacher acted as her father for the ceremony. Apparently it was quite touching.

“But her father was actually still alive. Apparently he had another family. He died last year… And left her with inheritance. She said she wanted nothing to do with her father, so she disclaimed it.”

She didn’t even want 1 yen of her father’s money. She wanted nothing to do with him, even after his death. Now I understand just how much Naho-san hated her father.

“The problem is that she didn’t discuss it with her family. That woman didn’t tell her husband about it, claiming that it was her ‘personal business.’ He ended up hearing about it in the end, though.”

“But it *is* her personal business…”

Kanae-san laughs at my objection.

“They're supposed to be a couple. She even relies on Souta-san for all of their income. Their house was bought on a loan. She should have talked about it with him, but she only cares about herself. She doesn’t even notice that her kid is going out on her own every day… She’s the scum of the earth.”

I want to argue back that something bad happened to Ii-chan because of her… It’s the kidnappers who are wrong. Naho-san didn’t do anything out of the ordinary.

“But money troubles are their business, right? Other people shouldn’t intervene.”

“Yes, but he couldn’t take it anymore, so he was considering filing for a divorce. Before he could, his wife ‘miraculously’ got pregnant, so he decided to stay.”

My heart feels heavy. She’s talking about something to celebrate as if it’s terrible. To be honest, I’m starting to feel like I can’t refute what Kanae-san is saying. I don’t think Naho-san is a bad person, but she and Souta-san definitely have problems between

them. But I'm hesitant to agree with something that Kanae-san said. It just doesn't feel right to be on her side.

"Even if it were all Naho-san's fault… Wouldn't it be better to just encourage them to talk it out?"

"That wouldn't change anything!" Kanae-san had been talking calmly until now, but she suddenly starts banging her head against the window. "Why?! I just wanted to save him! Why are my feelings 'wrong' just because I met him too late?! Why am I supposed to just accept it?! Why am I supposed to give up?!"

"K-kanae-san?!"

I'm horrified by her insane behaviour. She keeps repeatedly slamming her head into the window while actively driving. It's even more terrifying since she had been so calm before.

"I understand," Kougami gently puts her hand on Kanae-san's shoulder. "I totally get you. I've thought countless times about how things would be different… If only I had met Sakurako-san earlier…"

Kougami gently pats Kanae-san's shoulder sympathetically. Kanae-san seems to calm down, and stops hitting her head. Kanae-san quietly sobs for a while, though she never lets go of the steering wheel.

A taxi passes by. I desperately watch the orange lights fade into the distance, like a moth drawn to the lights at a convenience store. All that's waiting for me is my own doom.

"Anyway, we should call the mother, Tatewaki-kun. After that, it's her problem."

Kougami warns me not to say anything unnecessary.

"But…"

"I didn't ask for your opinion. She's going to try to persuade Ii-chan's mother to leave, so Kanae-san can take her place."

"How does she plan to do that?"

I know she said she doesn't want to hear my opinion, but I don't want to be part of this incomprehensible plan.

"We make it a story where Ii-chan was kidnapped by her adoptive mother because the mother wanted attention. We'll play the parts of the good people who rescued Ii-chan from her evil mother."

"And you seriously think that's going to work?"

Even if it were a perfect, well polished plan, that doesn't mean everyone is going to cooperate. I don't want to be involved in something I don't agree with, especially when the plan is this bad. But I also don't want Ii-chan, Sakurako-san, or Kougami to get hurt.

"That's why we need you. You'll make it work, right, Tatewaki-kun?"

"That's impossible!"

"It doesn't matter if it's unreasonable. Here, remember this?"

Kougami searches around in her pocket, and produced a square piece of paper.

"What?"

I cautiously take it, then open it up.

*I changed when I met you. You've taught me so many important, precious things. I wish I could keep the time we spent together as a specimen, even if it won't last forever. You've taught me about loss, too. I've always known that we wouldn't be able to stay together forever. I lo-*

"—T-this is…!"

My face instantly feels hot.

"It's a copy. The real one is hidden somewhere else. It's your actual suicide note, written in your handwriting, covered in your fingerprints. It sounds more like a love letter, though."

I'm so embarrassed, it feels like my ears could burst into flames.

"Why do you have this?!"

Kougami doesn't answer my question. She just glares at me with anger and hatred. It's the letter I wrote on that day when I infiltrated that suicide circle. It's true that it's my handwriting. I thought I lost it in all the chaos.

"This… Isn't a real suicide note. I had to write it, I didn't really have a choice, given the circumstances…"

"Don't say you didn't have a choice, I think it's a wonderful love letter."

"…"

I reflexively gulp. Her words feel sharper than any knife. I mean, what if Sakurako-san or Ariwara-san saw it…

"So, do you finally understand? We're in control over your life. Sakurako-san and Ii-chan's, as well. And with this, we can make your death look like a suicide… Or a double suicide with Sakurako-san, if we wanted."

I see… Given the contents of the letter, they could make it seem like either a suicide, or a murder-suicide. I wish I hadn't been so careless.

"So are you still going to say that you won't cooperate?" Kougami asks.

"…"

I can see hatred in Kougami's eyes, just like I've seen in countless other people. Anger, jealousy, and hatred… How, when, and why did she start to hate me so much?

"…I know there's nothing I can do about the fact that you hate me, Kougami… But hurting people isn't like you."

I can't help it if she hates me, but I like her. I don't want Hanabusa to control her.

"If you're only doing this because you hate me, then you can get out of the car right now. I'll work with Kanae-san in your stead. Go to a safe place. I don't want you to do anything bad, Kougami."

"Why?"

"Why…? Because we're friends, of course!"

Imai is in love with Kougami. I don't want to see my best friend or Kougami get hurt. If something happened to her, Isozaki-sensei would be sad, too. Kougami turns to look outside with a huff. I guess she's saying no.

"Don't be so full of yourself. We're not friends, and I didn't do this because of you… Ii-chan was having fun talking with me until the medicine kicked in. She said there was a place she'd always wanted to go."

"Somewhere she wants to go?"

"Yeah. And 'he' is actually nice. You say he's dangerous, but he really isn't… He's like staring into the abyss. He's only 'evil' when you're evil. The butterflies flutter around the blood and nectar of evil."

She whispers in a voice that almost sounds like she's singing. I feel like I'm going to cry. Kougami has no idea what kinds of "butterflies" that "nice person" collects.

"You called me a cowardly mouse, but what does that make you?"

"…I killed my grandma, so I must be evil," Kougami's voice sounds strained.

She's trembling. She looks like she could burst into tears at any moment.

"When my grandma passed away, my parents asked me, 'didn't she say anything to you?' They said… I should have known."

"No one thinks it's your fault. Nobody is blaming you, not even your grandpa-"

"Yes, they are," Kanae-san says quietly. "That's just how the world works. It's a lie that the world is kind to people who do their best. Society is kind to cowards, and condemns the hardworking people who make sacrifices. Whoever can blame someone else first is the winner."

Through the rear view mirror, I can see Kanae-san's dispirited eyes from behind her glasses.

"The dishonest people who step over the weak and are considered 'right.' Those who don't are cast aside, and are forced to carry a filthy burden. They're not recognized by society, simply left behind to fade away."

I suddenly notice that we're near Ii-chan's house now.

"You have to become a demon to be accepted by society. If you want to be happy, you have no choice but to drag other people down. In order to protect the people you care about, you have to become a demon."

## Part 9

We finally arrive at Ii-chan's house. Well, we park at a convenience store a short distance away so we don't look suspicious. This is the same spot where we had our strategy meeting just a few hours ago. It's the same place, and the same car, but I'm with two

people being brainwashed by Hanabusa instead of being with Sakurako-san and Isozaki-sensei. It almost doesn't feel real.

I wish this was all just a bad dream. All I want is to wake up in my bedroom. Or maybe on Sakurako-san's couch. I wouldn't want Sakurako-san to be the one to wake me up, though. I'd like gran to gently shake me awake, or maybe wake up from the scent of her cooking…

"Do you remember the plan?" Kougami angrily pulls me away from my happy delusion.

"Given the situation, it would be hard to talk to Naho-san alone without raising suspicion. Shouldn't I get Utsumi-san and Isozaki-sensei to help?"

"But Utsumi-san is a cop, and Isozaki-sensei is a nasty person."

I've had a feeling for a while, but Kougami really doesn't like Isozaki-sensei, huh?

"But I think it would seem unnatural to talk to Naho-san privately."

"Well you'll just have to deal with it. Utsumi-san and the others won't doubt you or Sakurako-san, right? Maybe we could get Sakurako-san to call and say she just wants to talk to the mother?"

"Yeah… If only she could."

It's already been over two hours since I parted ways with Isozaki-sensei. I forgot to contact him. He said that if he doesn't hear anything for three hours, he'll tell the police everything. If the police were to get involved right now, it could put Sakurako-san and Ii-chan in danger.

"In order to help Ii-chan and Kougami, Sakurako-san and I have to talk to Naho-san alone."

After letting Kougami check my message, I send it to Isozaki-sensei. A while later, I receive a reply saying Naho-san is waiting outside the house, so I go to meet her alone. Once I'm outside, I'm hit by the cool air. An autumn breeze. I can faintly smell someone grilling black carp in the distance. As I pass the next house, I catch the sweet scent of soap in the steam from their bath. It's the scent of everyday life. The scent of living. And in the middle of it all, I'm going to meet with Ii-chan's mother to help a criminal. Ah, I really wish this was a

nightmare. However, with no evidence that it's just a dream, I step firmly toward the Tominaga house. Naho-san notices me, and rushes over.

"I heard Kujou-san had something important to tell me… Did you find Yuuka?!"

"Yes. I just wanted to check a few things. Come with me to the car."

"I'm so glad… The police are looking for that woman, but she… Seems to have quit her job and moved out of her apartment…"

Naho-san cries tears of joy without a hint of doubt at my words. I lead her back to the convenience store parking lot. I think about taking her to the police, but I don't know what would happen to Sakurako-san if I did. In the end, I bring Naho-san all the way back. Naho-san isn't wary at all, since she's seen Sakurako-san's Kangoo before.

I notice the convenience store's security camera. Now I'm definitely an accomplice. I'm sorry, mom. I haven't given up, though. I'm still waiting for an opportunity, or someone to rescue us. Or at least for Kougami to be persuaded.

"So, what did you want to talk about…?"

Naho-san asks as she climbs into the back seat of the car. As soon as Kougami and I sit on opposite sides of her to prevent her from escaping, Naho-san notices something is wrong.

"…What's going on?!"

She notices that the woman looking back at her from the driver's seat isn't Sakurako-san, and begins twisting her body in an attempt to get away. In an instant, Kanae-san slaps Naho-san's cheek hard.

"Wha…!"

"Don't shout. And if you value that child's life, don't move."

Kanae-san's voice is soft and trails off. I can't tolerate this sudden violence. However, Kanae-san isn't just glaring at Naho-san, but at me as well. I tie up the dumbfounded Naho-san's hands while her lips quiver. Kougami seems to have noticed the camera, as well. She instructs Kanae-san to move the car to the small park near Ii-chan's house.

“Why…?” Naho-san asks, tears streaming down her face. She looks at me, betrayed.

“I’m sorry… that things turned out like this. But…”

Naho-san shakes her head as soon as I start apologizing.

“It’s fine… I understand.”

She seems to have grasped the situation based on Sakurako-san not being here, and the violence from earlier. She takes a deep breath, and glares back at Kanae-san.

“…Where’s Yuuka?” Naho-san’s voice trembles.

“She’s safe. For now, anyway,” Kanae-san replies with a grin. She looks like a predator toying with its prey.

“I see… Then that means I’m your target. What do you want from me?”

“I want you to vanish from Souta-san’s life. I want you to abandon everything, and I mean everything. Then I’ll bring your daughter home safely.”

I’m sure Naho-san had a feeling already, but she must know for sure now that Kanae-san is the kidnapper. She takes a small breath, then sighs.

“…And if I say no?”

“I’ll turn you into a mother who murdered her adopted child. You’re the reason she’s in danger right now, anyway.”

Naho-san’s expression stiffens. She bites her lip regretfully. She had a bad feeling about letting Ii-chan go alone.

“You look terrible. How can you be upset when you’ve been living the life I’ve dreamed of? You reap what you sow. It can’t be helped. God is using a child to punish you.”

Kanae-san is smiling from ear to ear. Her laughter starts out low and quiet, but soon she starts twitching and laughing maniacally like she has lost control of herself.

“Divine punishment… Then that means you’re trying to become god? What did I do wrong? Is it a bad thing that I’m just trying to be happy?”

“Trying to be happy? You people always say that! You think anything is possible if you just put in the effort! You just ignore all the people who try their best and never get what they want. Then you

say, ‘maybe you’re not trying hard enough?’ with a straight face!” Kanae-san screams as soon as she parks the car. Her saliva is flying everywhere.

Naho-san looks startled at Kanae-san’s sudden emotional outburst, but only for a moment. Naho-san holds steady, and glares back at Kanae-san.

“…That’s enough. I feel the same way as you. Everyone around me told me to work hard to get married, then as soon as I did, they told me that I had to have kids. I get blamed for being unable to have kids, and I get blamed for my husband cheating on me! What exactly have I been blessed with?!

“You kidnapped someone else’s children to raise as your own just to make yourself happy! It’s despicable!”

“I didn’t kidnap them.”

“That doesn’t change anything. They’re still not your children!”

Kanae-san leans out of her seat, her emotions flaring up. Naho-san does the same. The two of them hurl their anger at each other, neither one willing to budge an inch.

“You pretending to be a ‘mother’ is making Souta-san unhappy!”

“You’re wrong!” Naho-san screams, twisting her body.

“It’s true that I wanted to be a mother! It’s true that I thought motherhood could help change me… but that wasn’t all! I couldn’t help but reach out to them. When I saw that such small children, especially ones related by blood to someone I love, were losing their parents… I couldn’t just watch that happen!” Naho-san says, then pushes me aside as she reaches for the car door.

The driver has access to the locks on all the doors, though, so it doesn’t open.

“Fine! If you want him, you can have him! You’ll never be a mother with that half baked resolve! Give me my child back! I’ll take the kids and leave. Are you happy now?!”

“…No, that’s no good. I can’t let you live happily ever after with those children. You have to leave everything behind. I have to completely take over your perfect life,” Kanae-san says with that horrifyingly dark expression.

“No. I don’t think you can make the children happy.”

“I’m sure you’ll toss them away eventually. You're a cowardly woman who only thinks about herself.”

“I would never toss away Yuuka and—“

“That’s enough!” Kougami’s voice instantly cuts through the car. “Geez! How much longer are you going to keep arguing?! Just kill her already.”

“Kougami…?”

I’m horrified. Kougami is holding that palette knife again.

“You hate her, right? Then kill her. Destroy everything and take it all away. Humans turn into monsters when they can’t have what they want. You can’t do it? Coward!”

The knife grazes Naho-san’s cheek inside the cramped car. Kougami is sick of us just sitting there, dumbfounded. She throws a thin rope onto my lap.

“Tatewaki-kun, tie up her hands!” She shouts with the knife pointed at Kanae-san, rather than Naho-san.

“What?”

I thought she was asking me to tie up Naho-san even more, so I’m confused by where she’s pointing.

“She’ll just be a nuisance if she acts up again! I’ll deal with her, so shut up and get tying! Are all of you slow in the head? I’m the one with the knife. That kid’s life is in my hands. You’d better listen to me!”

Kougami holds her knife up. I quickly tie up Kanae-san.

“Hurry up and get out. I don’t want to get Sakurako-san’s car dirty with your blood.”

“Why…? How could you do this…?” Naho-san asks in a trembling voice.

“…I hate my mother.”

“But I’m not your mom.”

“I know that, but you’re the same as her. You’re both irrational creatures called ‘mothers.’”

Kougami spits out the word “mothers” with disgust on her face.

“She always says ‘it’s for your sake’ but it’s really for her own. She pushes anything inconvenient onto me. Every single time. She quit her job, and put my grandpa into a home. She says it’s so I can

have my life back, or so that I can focus on my exams… She put this curse on me for ‘my sake.’”

“I’m sure your mother loves you very much, and wants to sacrifice herself to make you happy.”

“I didn’t ask for that!”

I know that Kougami was raised with a lot of care. Her mom is busy helping with Kougami’s dad’s shop, so Kougami is left to take care of her grandpa and the housework. Her house is always spotless, too. When my mom is busy, the house quickly gets messy from both of us just leaving things lying around. I remember Kougami telling me about how she asked her grandma to teach her how to do housework when she was in elementary school. Kougami saw how busy her mom was, and wanted to help however she could.

“But I’m sure she doesn’t want to inconvenience her daughter. Even if it makes things harder for her, she wants to do what’s best for you.”

“Oh, how wonderful. Truly splendid. Are you trying to sound like the Virgin Mary? Then stop patronizing me. Quit saying that this is my fault! I’m not the one making my mother unhappy!”

“That’s not what I’m saying!”

“It’s all the same! She tells me that I should be free to pick whatever job I want, and I don’t have to worry about the house - as if I could!”

Naho-san desperately tries to rush out the door, but Kougami grabs her by the base of her neck and holds the knife toward her.

“Please… Stop!”

“She’s right, Kougami. You can’t do this.”

Kougami mercilessly points the knife toward me when I reach out to try to help Naho-san.

“You can’t… Please, I don’t want you to do this…”

“Isozaki-sensei told me to decide what I want to do for myself,”

Kougami glares at me, slowly shaking her head.

“Wait, are you really going to kill her?” Kanae-san asks, looking at Kougami anxiously.

“It’ll be fine as long as they don’t find the body. You can become the mother of that family, just like you planned. There’s no problem,

right? Unlock the door already," Kougami says coldly.

The mourning cloak butterfly is frighteningly unhesitant. Soon, Kanae-san manages to awkwardly unlock the door with her tied up hands. Kougami grabs Naho-san's arm hard, trying to push her down.

"Kougami, calm down. Your grandma would never forgive you if you do this," I desperately plead.

There should still be an unwavering love deep within this cruel, black butterfly.

"…You really are stupid, Shoutarou Tatewaki."

However, the expression that rises to Kougami's face is one of contempt and ridicule.

"Haven't you learned anything from Sakurako-san? Dead people can't speak. My grandma can't tell me anything."

"Kyah!"

With those words, Kougami opens the car door and shoves Naho-san out. In an instant, several men in suits rush out from behind the tall hedges around the park, hurrying toward Naho-san. The person running the fastest is someone with shaggy hair that I'm all too used to seeing.

"Conversations with the dead are one sided. No matter how much I wish for it, she'll never call my name in her sweet, gentle voice . Isn't that right, Sakurako-san?" Kougami says in a lonely voice as she climbs out of the car.

"…Huh?"

"That's right. The dead have no wishes. Desires are reserved for the living."

Someone slowly walks toward Kougami. There's no doubt about it. It's Sakurako-san, who should still be confined in the abandoned house.

## Part 10

"I'm so happy, Naho-san!"

"Utsumi-san!"

Naho-san falls to her knees. Utsumi-san hugs her and helps her to her feet. At the same moment, several people (presumably police

officers) get out of cars parked in the surrounding area.

"What are you doing here?!"

Kanae-san is screaming and banging her head against the car window. I nervously get out of the car. The police calmly ask Kanae-san to stop hurting herself, and urge her to get out of the car.

Kougami clings to Sakurako-san's arm like a spoiled child.

"You are being charged for abducting and kidnapping a minor."

The police finally start half-forcing Kanae-san out of the car.

She shrieks and thrashes around, trying to resist. A woman police officer comes over to explain the situation and try to calm her down.

"Why me?! You have the wrong person!"

Nobody believes her story about how adoption is the same as kidnapping.

"You're not a butterfly, and you never will be. Hanabusa knows that, too. That's why he gave you the wing from a Milionia basalis. It isn't a butterfly. It's just a greedy moth that devours trees," Sakurako-san says once Kanae-san has been fully removed from her car.

Kanae-san wordlessly screams as she's pushed into the police car. I'm relieved that this is all over, but I also have no idea what just happened.

"But really… What *are* you doing here?" I ask weakly.

Kougami laughs and tells me that I "look terrible." This is nothing to laugh about… But I can't even muster the energy to say anything.

"Yuuka is safe. She's awake and already munching away at the zangi for the party."

Sakurako-san ruffles my hair.

"What about the sleeping medicine…?"

"It was a Charles Dawson recipe," Sakurako-san snickers.

I feel like Kougami mentioned that before.

"I've never heard of this Charles guy."

"That's because you don't study enough. He was an amateur archeologist back in the early 20th century."

"It's a pretty famous event," Kougami says, smiling triumphantly at Sakurako-san.

“He excavated a skull that had traits from both modern humans and apes at the Piltdown Quarry in the suburbs of London. This so-called “Dawn-Man” was a huge discovery for unravelling the evolutionary history of humans, but after being studied, it unfortunately turned out to be a forgery. He created the fake by skillfully combining human and orangutan bones.”

“Nobody knows who was responsible for the hoax, but Conan Doyle, author of Sherlock Holmes, was named as a possible suspect. That’s how I heard about it,” Kougami reveals.

She’s a big fan of classic mysteries, like those by Doyle or Christie.

“Then…”

“Yeah, it was fake. There was no sleeping medicine in the sports drink.”

I see… Now that she mentions it, the medicine worked too fast.

“But weren’t you trapped? How did you escape?”

“Did you forget? Sakurako-san can open a padlock with a hairpin.”

“But where did you… Oh.”

I answer my own question. There was definitely someone there wearing a hairpin. A cute one with red strawberries.

“I see, so it was Ii-chan’s…”

“There was a gap next to the door, right? If you push on it hard enough, the wood comes off.”

“Yuriko also hid her phone inside your sweater.”

“Sorry for leaving you so cold, Tatewaki-kun, but I had to make sure nobody noticed it in the sleeve when I gave it to Sakurako-san.”

Kougami apologizes while flapping her sleeves. Apparently she used an app to arrange for a taxi, as well. We switched cars because there was a lot of evidence left in Kanae-san’s car, and it also helped stall for time.

“There was a chance that she set up a listening device, too.”

I feel incredibly defeated that this was all planned from the start. If I were in her position, would I have done so well?

“But then…”

If everything was just part of her plan, then– I heave a sigh of relief, completely emptying my lungs. Kougami quietly smiles and nods.

“Yeah, Kanae-san is a very unstable person, so I didn’t know what she would do if the police hadn’t caught her.”

“I-I’m glad… I thought you were serious…”

“No, I was serious. Otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to deceive her, because… You’re a bad liar, aren’t you, Tatewaki-kun? I had to make sure you were actually nervous.”

“...Huh?”

“I wasn’t lying, I actually do hate you. Your ‘justice’ repulses me,” Kougami says clearly and quietly.

I’m speechless. I convinced myself that Hanabusa coerced her into saying something she didn’t really mean.

“...I see.”

It'll take me a while to fully process this, but there’s nothing I can do about it if she hates me.

“Sorry, I… Always thought of you as a close friend…”

I suddenly feel an intense headache come on. I hold my head in my hands. Kougami laughs cheerfully in my ear.

“I know that. I can tell that you don’t hate me. Seeing how serious you looked while you tried to convince me to stop… I can tell you think of me as a very dear friend.”

“Of course I do! Besides, if something happened to you, your parents, Azechi, and Imai would…”

“I’m not talking about Imai-kun. I’m talking about you.”

“Hm?”

I look up to see Kougami staring at me.

“I… I also don’t know what I’d do if you were gone.”

Kougami smirks.

“Why do you look so smug?”

“I just feel like it.”

Kougami reminds me of Sakurako-san right now, because of her habit of saying rude things and her mischievous grin.

“I think… That most crimes happen by coincidence,” Kougami mutters.

Sakurako-san gives up on fighting it and allows Kougami to hug her arm. Sakurako-san raises one eyebrow.

“I think that everyone has seeds of dissatisfaction and hatred in their hearts. When enough coincidences line up, those seeds sprout into flowers of crime. Just like in Suguroku, if the pieces just so happen to line up for a particular person at the right time, that person will become a criminal. That’s why I’m positive that anyone can become a victim or perpetrator in the blink of an eye.”

Her words remind me of several of the cases I’ve seen before. It’s true. Lives are lost when a number of unfortunate coincidences line up. It’s neither good nor bad.

“Well… People kill for the sake of love, but I think love can also stop them,” Kougami says, clinging to Sakurako-san even tighter.

“All night long, ‘he’ has been talking sweetly in my ear, trying to make my flower of crime sprout. Giving me what I truly want. There were many times when my heart wavered, but… In the end, I knew I wanted to be with you two.”

Kougami is a beautiful, kind, diligent, and strong person. I thought she was perfect, so much better than me, and wanted for nothing. That’s why I’m truly surprised that she’s been envious of me. I feel like I should be the one envying her. However, at the same time, she’s much more normal of a girl than I thought. If I hadn’t met Sakurako-san, I might have fallen in love with her.  I’m glad I’m not Imai’s rival, though.

“Yuriko-chan!”

Soon, Utsumi-san brings Ii-chan over to where we are. Naho-san is behind them.

“You’re awake now. Good morning!” Kougami rushes over to hug Ii-chan.

She seems unaware that she was kidnapped. Naho-san discreetly tells me that we can just say she fell asleep during a drive.

“Anyway, you’re getting so big, Ii-chan!”

It feels like her round face has gotten a bit more defined, and she seems more grown up than last time I saw her. Her arms and legs have gotten longer, too. It feels like she’s evolved from being a

baby to a human. Sakurako-san picks Ii-chan up with a broad smile. That's right, in just six months, Ii-chan will be the same age that Soutarou-kun was when he disappeared.  Naho-san watches fondly as we take turns fawning over Ii-chan. Her eyes become red and wet.

"I'm sorry… I made you feel so scared,"

Kougami approaches Naho-san and speaks softly.

"No, thank you. Yuuka said you played with her. Really, I don't know how to thank you."

Kougami shakes her head, flustered, upon hearing that. She confided in me later. She didn't actually intend to protect Ii-chan at the start.

–There really is a black, sinful butterfly within me. An imprisoned butterfly in mourning clothes.

Still, she really did protect Ii-chan, and Sakurako-san as well. Naho-san's life, too.

It seems that Souta-san has to go with the police to explain what happened with Kanae-san. Ii-chan has to go to the hospital to ensure that she isn't injured.

"...There's somewhere I want to go before we head to the hospital," Kougami says to Utsumi-san and Naho-san.

"Hm?"

"There's somewhere you want to go, right, Ii-chan?"

Ii-chan looks like she remembered something upon hearing Kougami's words, but she quickly looks troubled and shakes her head.

"No, it's okay. We promised to go together, after all." Kougami kneels on the ground so she can be at eye level with Ii-chan.

"But…"

"It's fine… We'll all go together."

Ii-chan looks at me and each of the adults, one by one, then nods.

"Yuri-chan, where are you going…?" Utsumi-san asks.

Kougami stands back up with Ii-chan clinging to her.

"...The old house. The place where Ii-chan and Haruku-kun used to live."

That's where their mom was stabbed by her boyfriend. The place where their mom took her last breath. The rest of us are hesitant to go to a place like that, but Kougami insists that we absolutely have to go. None of us can say no to her.

We start heading to the house, each of us feeling anxious. Fortunately, Ii-chan never actually saw her bloodied mom's corpse. Ii-chan has said many times that her "mama died," but Naho-san isn't sure exactly how much she understands about the concept of death. For at least a year, "mama" was treated like a taboo word in the Tominaga family, so Ii-chan didn't talk about it much.

Eventually, we arrive at that old, one-story house. It's past 7pm now. I was worried about visiting so late… But apparently nobody lives here right now.

"It's been vacant this whole time. Ever since… Y'know, *that* happened," Utsumi-san says, peering through the window. There's no curtains, but it's pitch black inside.

Since the house was already old, apparently they're thinking of tearing it down and rebuilding. Flashlights in hand, we follow Ii-chan into the house. Or we would, but she trots around to the side of the house instead. There's a rusty clothesline lying on the ground next to the house. Next to it is a single broken brick that fell out, with a big crack in the mortar of the wall.

"Yuuka…?"

Naho-san watches nervously as Ii-chan takes a small shovel out of her backpack. Then Ii-chan starts moving the bricks out of the way.

"What's she doing?"

"I'm shovelling," Ii-chan informs us.

When asked if she wants someone else to dig, she shakes her head at first, but soon finds the dirt too hard to dig through with her toy shovel.

"Let's switch," She says, handing me the shovel.

I dig through the soil and gravel mixture as I'm told. I can tell that the dirt has been disturbed before. After digging about 10 centimetres down, the shovel hits something hard.

"Oh…"

Ii-chan takes the shovel from me, and excitedly starts digging around the object. Soon, she takes out a slightly rusty confection container.

"Found it!" Ii-chan says, delighted.

This must be what she was after. For now, we all return to the car. All the adults watch with interest as Ii-chan happily pops the lid off the container. She grins at us again. Inside is a single 10,000 yen bill, several 1,000 yen bills, and several 500 yen coins.

"It's for Naho-chan," Ii-chan says with a wide smile as she hands the box over to Naho-san.

"...Huh?"

"It's hospital money. You use it when you aren't feeling well. Then you get better!"

Naho-san looks at all of us, surprised.

"Hospital money…"

"I see," Sakurako-san says, smiling calmly. "That child's father was a drug addict. He also had a gambling problem, so they must have struggled financially. Her mother must have hid money here in case there was an emergency. Like if she or the children got sick and needed to see a doctor, for example."

Kougami nods.

"Ii-chan wanted to give this money to you since you're unwell. But you didn't know where her old house was, and she couldn't go alone… So that's why she got in the car with me. She was hesitant to get in at first."

Ii-chan remembered she was told not to get in a car with strangers, so she refused Kougami at first. In the end, she accepted the invitation so she could give this money to Naho-san.

"If you just said so…"

Kougami slowly shakes her head.

"When she talks about this house, it makes you sad. And you don't like it when she talks about her mom."

“No, that’s not true! What makes me sad is Yuuka feeling sad because she’s remembering her mom. I didn’t mean to keep Yuuka from talking about her mom… I love her mom, since we’re both her moms.”

Naho-san hugs Yuuka tightly. She starts to cry. Ii-chan looks a bit down because Naho-san is crying.

“...Really?”

“Don’t worry, kiddo. Naho-chan is just super happy.”

Utsumi-san gently pinches the uneasy Ii-chan’s cheek.

“You have two moms. That means there’s two people who love you more than anything else in the world. You’re a lucky kid.”

Ii-chan shakes her head at his words.

“No, Naho-chan isn’t my mom.”

“Yuuka…”

Naho-san’s expression stiffens at Ii-chan’s innocent yet cruel words. Inside of the car instantly feels cold.

“Right? Naho-chan is my mother, right?” Ii-chan tilts her head to the side curiously.

“…Yes?” Utsumi-san nods.

“At kindergarten, Naho-chan is my mother. That’s why I drew her a picture for mother’s day.”

Ii-chan looks at us, confused.  Naho-san’s eyes fill with tears again.

“That’s right… I’m your mother.”

I’m still not sure how much Ii-chan understands about her situation, and I’m sure she’ll be troubled about it someday. But I know that those two will be able to work through it. I can tell from Ii-chan’s smile.

Final part

We part ways with Ii-chan and the others at the hospital. Kougami is going home tonight, too. Before we part ways, Ii-chan tugs on Utsumi-san’s sleeve.

“What’s up?”

“Um, do you know where Yuriko-chan’s house is?”

“...Hm? Yuri-chan’s house? Yeah, it’s a burger shop, right? Why?” Utsumi-san replies.

“Alright!” Ii-chan shouts happily.

“Because Yuriko-chan is lost.”

“Huh?”

“When we were in the car, she said she didn’t know where her home was. Please take her home like you did for me.”

“Don’t worry, Utsumi-san will get you home safe and sound.”

Kougami is embarrassed but happy.

“Got it! I’ll bring her home for you!” Utsumi-san salutes.

“Yes, sir!” Ii-chan salutes back at him.

I nudge Kougami with my elbow. She pouts and kicks me in the shin. Her face is all red. Naho-san giggles while she watches us, then offers Kougami a handshake.

“Thank you for protecting my daughter.”

Kougami shakes her head without taking Naho-san’s hand. Perhaps she feels like she doesn’t deserve a heartfelt thank you.

“I really do appreciate it. Also, I… This might be pretentious of me to say because I’m still new to being a mother, but… I think you should talk to your mom.”

Naho-san smiles wryly and pats Kougami on the shoulder.

“I’m going to think things over again, and talk to my husband. Let’s try to be brave together…” Naho-san says, as she nervously pulls Kougami into a hug. “I… Have a lot of things I’ve been too scared to say; both to my husband and to Yuuka. That woman was half-right about what she said. I thought that if I became a mother, things would be better. That it would make the bad memories go away.”

But real life doesn’t work that way. Of course, it isn’t true that she got married and adopted her kids just for self-gratification. She didn’t get pregnant to save her marriage, either. Naho-san sadly confesses that she didn’t become a mother purely because she loves her children.

“I can’t forgive her, but I’m grateful that she gave me the courage to fight my cowardice. I’m thinking of starting over. That’s why I want you, who saved my daughter, to be happy.”

“Naho-san…”

Naho-san hugs Kougami tighter. Kougami gently pats Naho-san on the back, as if she’s answering her feelings.

“After all, families are just people. We have to face each other and talk openly. That’s how a family grows… So I think you should talk to your mom. Whether it’s something happy, sad, or annoying… It’s fine. Even if you fight, you’re still family.”

Naho-san strokes Kougami’s cheek before letting go. She holds Ii-chan’s hand as they walk into the hospital. Kougami puts her hand to her cheek in embarrassment. Sakurako-san points behind her.

“It doesn’t look like the police dog will be able to do what the kitten asked for,” Sakurako-san snickers.

I follow where Sakurako-san is pointing. Isozaki-sensei is standing there with Kougami’s mom.

“--Mom?”

“Yuriko!”

Kougami’s mom rushes over. I grab Kougami’s hand before she can escape. She glares at me and shakes off my hand, then approaches her mom as though she’s made up her mind.

“Mom, uh…”

I’m sorry. Unable to apologize for running away from home, Kougami’s lips move as though she’s saying those words, but no sound comes out. I don’t think it’s because she lacks the courage, though. I thought Kougami’s mom would scold her, but upon seeing her daughter alive and well, she begins to sob loudly.

“Mom…”

She cries, clinging to her daughter.

“I was worried. Really, really worried.”

She hugs Kougami tighter and tighter until she can force those words out.

“Yeah… I’m sorry,” Kougami says, although her words are immediately drowned out by her own sobs.

Kougami and her mom look really similar while hugging each other and crying. Kougami is a little bit taller, though. I think they have similar personalities, as well. When you’re worried about someone you love, it can be hard to convey your feelings to them. Those two

are so alike that there's no need to worry. Kougami isn't a black butterfly.

"...I'm so relieved that I'm getting hungry now," I say at the same time my stomach growls loudly.

"I wanted to eat cake, too. The party is ruined now."

"What? How can you say that in front of me when I had my precious day off ruined?"

Sakurako-san complains about not being able to eat gran's pie or Haruku-kun's birthday cake, while Isozaki-sensei complains about not being able to go to the gym. While the two of them keep complaining and light heartedly arguing, I suddenly feel exhausted, and quietly move away from them.

"...I'm surrounded by awkward people."

At least they seem happy. When I let out a sigh, my breath is unexpectedly white. It's almost November. Asahidake is already covered in snow. After the blood red season, everything freezes as it turns into the season of ice.

## Intermedio

The incident with Ii-chan's kidnapping has been safely resolved. It's being reported that a high school girl who knew Ii-chan was unfortunately involved in the kidnapping, but managed to save her thanks to her quick wit. Even if it's not entirely true, it's not too far off. I think that Ii-chan went home safe because of Kougami.

Kanae-san has been spewing incoherent nonsense this whole time. Utsumi-san told me in secret that it doesn't seem like she'll go to prison at this rate… Her parents in Sapporo said that they would keep a close eye on her to make sure something like this never happens again.

On Saturday, 6 days after the incident, Kougami and I are visiting our usual tea shop with Sakurako-san. Isozaki-sensei is here, too. At first glance, it must look like a luxurious tea time, but unfortunately, the topic of conversation isn't very pleasant.

“So you saw the newspaper and went to the publisher to find out who submitted it… Is that right?” Sakurako-san says with a grim expression, after taking a sip of her milk tea.

“Yes. After I contacted the company about it, it took about a week to get in contact with the person who submitted it. There was a letter in my mailbox with no address on it… There was a butterfly wing and an email address inside.” Kougami thought it was strange, but her curiosity got the better of her. “I thought it was creepy, but I did give the newspaper company my contact information, so I figured that’s how they found out where I live… I was cautious at first, and contacted them with a burner email address…”

Even though she explained that she tried to be careful, Kougami’s voice gradually gets quieter when she notices Isozaki-sensei scowling.

“Besides… I didn’t think he was crazy or anything. He called himself ‘The Swallow.’ He said that he felt there were too many heartless people in the world these days. He submitted the poem in anger, but I was the only one who responded.”

Even if he was a little bit odd, “The Swallow” seemed like an intelligent person who liked poetry and worried about the state of society. Kougami confesses that she thought he seemed like an educated person, and she enjoyed talking to him. They started off with casual conversation, and gradually Kougami started to consult him about her troubles. Just like Phantom when I was stuck in the hospital, his messages were the only thing that made her feel supported.

“Since we’d never see each other, it made me feel like I could talk about anything with him. Besides…”

“Besides?” Sakurako-san repeats.

Kougami hesitates slightly. “Besides… Somehow… He reminded me of Sakurako-san.”

Hearing Kougami embarrassedly say that talking to this person felt like Sakurako-san enthusiastically listening to her and giving her advice brings back vivid memories of my conversations with Phantom. I understand how she feels. It’s hard to hate someone who eagerly listens to you when you’re weak, mentally or physically. When

I was in the hospital after being stabbed, they became a dear friend of mine.

On that day when Kougami got into a huge fight with her mom, she clung to him. The Swallow was the one person who understood her. He cleverly wove a spider web to ensnare her.

"…I guess it's your generation. My generation didn't grow up with the internet, so we don't have as high online literacy. Still, I hope you'll be a bit more careful when making friends you can't see," Isozaki-sensei mumbles.

I don't think this era of easily meeting people through social media, but having a hard time meeting in person is a bad thing.

"There's still a certain amount of risk involved. Not that it's okay to get wrapped up in criminal behavior when you're an adult, but while you're still underage, I don't want you depending so heavily on someone you don't know much about," Isozaki-sensei says while drinking his caramel milk with plenty of extra homemade caramel added.

It's a gentle, slightly bittersweet milk.

"But there's people you don't know the true personality of, even if you're acquaintances. Besides… There's some things I don't want my parents, teachers… or even my friends to know," Kougami objects, saying it's even harder to talk to a friend the closer you are.

She ran away from home rather than talk about her worries with her best friend, Azechi. Apparently there was a time the two of them were going to meet at a park, but after half an hour, Azechi still hadn't shown up.

"She said she'd be a little late, so I decided to wait another hour or so. I was bored, so I decided to listen to music with my earbuds. I didn't even realize he was approaching me."

Suddenly, she couldn't see. Her head was covered by something like a paper bag. She was told that if she stayed quiet and didn't do anything violent, he wouldn't harm her. She has no choice but to obey. It was terrifying. When her arms were tied up, a pain ran up her right arm. He had injected something into her.

"He put me in a car, but I was so dizzy that I couldn't see his face. I was terrified. I thought he would kill me."

She was drugged, then put to sleep on a soft bed.

“He didn’t really hurt me in any way. My memories are hazy because of the drugs, so I don’t remember much… I do remember being in a dark room, lit only by candlelight. It smelled nice, like jasmine or musk. It was  a sweet, gentle scent.”

Maybe it was because of the drugs, but she wasn’t scared at all anymore. In fact, she felt completely relaxed.

“He sat next to my bed all night long and talked to me. I was tired, but I couldn’t help but listen to him. He asked me who I hate, and said I wouldn’t have to put up with them anymore.  His voice was soft. He didn’t say anything violent or disagreeable. All he did was ‘affirm’ me.”

He awoke and shook up feelings deep within her. Soon, it started to sound like a good thing to do. To break out of her chrysalis.

“If you’re honest with yourself, it will go smoothly. He made me feel like I could be rid of all the dark, gloomy feelings and doubts. He said I could ‘get anything I want.’”

Eventually, she fell asleep. When she woke up, “The Swallow” was gone, and she was in a car that Kanae-san was driving. Kougami tells us about how they were told that if they worked together, they could get what they wanted. That was how the kidnapping plan started. Kougami eventually came to her senses once she realized that all she was doing was kidnapping a little girl. She realized how horrible the things she’d been dreaming of really were.

“But until then, I truly believed that what I was doing was right.”

“Was it right for him to make you, a young girl, commit a crime like that?” Sakurako-san clearly looks displeased,

“I don’t think so… But he’d been slowly poisoning my mind for about a month. It felt like my legs were shaking.”

That’s how Hanabusa brainwashes his criminals. I grab my throat. There’s a bitter, painful feeling in it. Isozaki-sensei maintains his stern expression and crosses his arms.

“…So you don’t know Hanabusa’s true identity?” Sakurako-san mutters with a sigh. She already finished her cake, so she looks like she just wants this conversation to end.

“Umm… That’s everything,” Kougami says.

Sakurako-san's expression suddenly changes completely. "If you know anything else, then say it."

"Ah… Right. It wasn't just The Swallow… There was another person later on. The two of them were saying things about how it wasn't going according to plan, it's too early, this wasn't what they'd talked about… I think I heard them arguing like that while I was half asleep."

"Two people?" I was trying not to interrupt, but I couldn't help it.

Sakurako-san looks at me with the same surprise that I'm feeling. "So… He has an accomplice?"

"I don't know… They were talking about a 'Snow-something butterfly' and 'eclosion' that I didn't really understand. All I know for sure is that it seemed like The Swallow couldn't defy the other person."

"Could it have been a snow apollo butterfly?"

"Yeah, I think that was it." Kougami nods.

A delicate, white butterfly - the symbol that Hanabusa imposed on Sakurako-san. Sakurako-san's eyebrow twitches.

"Do you know anything else? Was the voice familiar?"

"Not really… Oh, but their hair touched me," Kougami says, desperately racking her brain.

"Hair… But…"

Long hair. Hanabusa has no hair on his body, though.

"They were checking to see if I had any injuries. I was looking down when their hair touched my skin. I think it was probably a man with long hair."

"Not a wig? It was definitely human hair?"

"I was blindfolded, so I don't really know, but… It felt like real hair."

"You're sure there were two people? And both were male?" Isozaki-sensei asks anxiously. I know what he's worried about.

"Yes. I'm quite certain."

Isozaki-sensei lets out a weak breath. At the very least, he knows that Minami-san wasn't present when Kougami was kidnapped. Nobody has been able to contact Minami-san still.

“Hanabusa doesn’t dirty his own hands. He was probably controlling the person who kidnapped Yuriko.”

We haven’t been able to contact Yamaji-san from Mashike, either. My anxiety grows.

“At least I heard their voices. Now I can tell if someone is The Swallow if I hear their voice,” Kougami says, asking us to tell her when anything happens from now on.

Waves form as the tea in my cup shakes. It’s like a reflection of my unease.

“He said that I didn’t have to worry about messing up, and that he’ll contact me again. I’ll let Sakurako-san know right away if that happens.”

“I understand, but don’t overdo it. Your safety is more important.”

We’re all reluctant to involve Kougami in the Hanabusa situation any more, but whether we want it or not, Hanabusa is reaching for her with his tentacles. I pour the remaining tea from the pot into my cup. The dark tea reminds me of the colour of old blood.

## Second Bone: Where the Knave of Hearts Disappeared To

The biggest event in my second year of high school was the school field trip. The festival was just the calm before the storm. I had a lot of fun exploring Kyoto, Nara, and Tokyo with my friends… Except for one problem.

Ever since the kidnapping incident, there has been an indescribably tension between Kougami and I. We try to act normal around Azechi and Imai, but Kougami won’t even look me in the eye anymore. I sort of know why, but it’s something that I’ve been wondering about this whole time - my suicide note. Kougami knows how I feel. She knows something I should never have put into words. She said that she had a copy, so Hanabusa must have the original. It’s worrying me, since I can’t trust Kougami 100% right now.

On the day I get back to Asahikawa, I buy my usual pudding and visit my grandma's grave. I don't know what to do in this situation, I need guidance. The cut leaf coneflowers that bloom around the cemetery have started to wither, and have lost most of their leaves. The harvest is already over, so the fields are waiting for the snow to fall on them. According to the weather forecast, we're supposed to get our first snow of the season on Monday.

Of course, I know my grandma won't say anything to me, even if I visit her grave, But I still come here sometimes, because I don't want her to be ashamed of me. I zone out in front of the grave for half an hour.

Even though it's not Obon right now, there are a few other people visiting their loved ones. Given how cold it is, I thought the only other living things here would be Japanese tree frogs. I notice several people cleaning their family's graves before the snow comes, so I do the same. It's better if it's clean. I'll make sure it's clean next year, and the year after that… Actually, I wonder if I'll still be living in this city at that point.

"Well… I'll see you next time, grandma."

I'm not sure why, but I feel like I'm about to cry, so I quickly say goodbye and leave. On my way out, I pass by a young woman staring at a grave with a worried expression. The grave looks new, and she seems to be talking to it. She looks sad. I wonder if I looked like that, too.

I don't feel right going home when I'm feeling this lonely, so I stop by the Kujo house on my way back. The old tree by the road is losing its leaves for fall. Hector must have noticed my bike, because he's already at the door barking by the time I get there. I don't even have time to ring the doorbell before gran opens the door and welcomes me inside.

The fluffy beast can't even wait for me to lock up my bike before he pushes his nose into my arms. When I bend down to take off my shoes, he licks my face all over. Hector always greets me so passionately that I can't even breathe. Today, I'm happy to receive so much affection,

“Hey, that’s enough! You’re suffocating him!” Gran pats Hector on the back, then offers me a wet towel to wipe my face. After I wash off, I head to the living room.

“Oh, you went to visit your grandma’s grave?” Gran smiles when she sees me holding a bag from Chick Pudding.

“I had a dream about her last night. Plus they had limited edition pudding flavours for Halloween.” I promised to always bring my grandma pudding. “I’m glad I got to clean her grave before it snowed… Oh right, here’s some souvenirs from my school trip.”

Gran smiles again when I hand her the paper bag. I got them pickled vegetables from Kyoto. It’s shibadzuke and sliced radishes. It’s a small amount, so it shouldn’t be too much for them to finish.

“We’ve been preparing the garden for winter for the last week. I’ll give you some tea if you help.”

“Sure, I’ll help with that, then.”

“You just got back from your trip, though. Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I just took the plane today.”

Hector rushes over to Sakurako-san, who is reading a magazine, to tell her that I’m here. She nods slightly to greet me.

Gran isn’t strong enough to do a lot of yard work, but she still cleans up the leaves before it snows, and puts snow covers on the plants so they’re healthy in the spring. Besides, it’s almost time to get the snow shovels out of the shed. When the first snow comes late, it usually ends up lingering for a long time.

“Sakurako-san, you haven’t changed your tires yet, right? I’ll help you.”

My brother trained me on how to do things like change a tire in advance of me getting my driver’s license.

“That’s true… But Ms. Shouko is coming over. We can do it after,” She says, finally putting her magazine down. Hector takes the opportunity to lick Sakurako-san on the nose. It’s kind of like an indirect kiss.

“I see… Wait, did something happen again?” I’m wary because even though Shouko-san is a calm person, she usually brings chaos.

“I have no reason to think there’s any trouble. She just wants me to taste test some cake.”

“Taste testing? Shouko-san made it?”

“No, it’s from her acquaintance’s cake shop.”

For a moment, I think that I brought pudding at a bad time, but this is Sakurako-san we’re talking about. She’s always happy to have sweets.

“There’s a Halloween event in front of the station the day after tomorrow, right?”

“Now that you mention it, I guess there is.”

“Apparently this shop is entering the sweets contest.”

“Ah, the decisive battle for Asahikawa’s best sweets! Is what they call it, anyway. I participated in the preliminary voting online.”

Sweets shops in Asahikawa make Halloween inspired treats. They collect votes based on popularity, then the top five battle for the number one spot. I check the results of the preliminaries on my phone. According to Sakurako-san, she’s being asked to sample the cake from a cafe called Mad Tea Party. It’s a tart with a pumpkin pâte sucrée and decorated to look like a cute jack o lantern. It looks delicious.

“You came all the way here. It’d be better to have more than one opinion, right?” Sakurako-san says.

I decide to wait for Shouko-san. I start helping gran prepare tea, and before long, Shouko-san arrives with the cake.

“Welcome back, Shou-chan. How was your trip?”

“It was fun. Here, I brought you a souvenir.”

I’d intended to leave Shouko-san’s souvenir with Sakurako-san for now, but I can hand it to her in person now. It’s rose scented perfume.

“Ooh, this smells wonderful.” She immediately opens the package and sniffs it.

“It’s the same as the one I got for Sakurako-san, but in a different scent.”

I got Sakurako-san a cherry blossom scented one . Well… I don’t think she’ll use it, though.

“More importantly, where’s the cake?” Sakurako-san is bouncing in her chair with excitement.

“Geez, even Hector is more patient than you.” Shouko-san sighs. She looks down at Hector, who is waiting to be pet with a smile on his face. Hector wags his tail. He looks proud of himself for getting everyone’s attention.

“You’re right,” gran says. She places plates and forks on the table in front of the couch.

“Whatever, just hurry up and bring it out.”

Shouko-san sighs again as she brings out the cake box. Even Shouko-san can’t resist Sakurako-san’s excitement. I take a sip of my tea to stifle my laughter while she opens the box.

“Here it is. Personally, I think it’s already good enough. Oh, and this is for you,” Shouko-san says as she gives Hector a rawhide bone. She starts explaining the different sweets.

It’s a pumpkin pate sucre that looks like a pumpkin tart, and smells like pumpkin and butter.

“The patissier is really excited. She wants to impress Chef Mozu, no matter what it takes.”

“Oh, so Chef Mozu is going to judge it?”

Chef Mozu, also known as Akihito Mozu, is a French-trained chef from Hokkaido. His appearance and charisma have gotten him featured on lots of TV shows. He has earned the cool nickname “the man with 100 tongues.”

“Yum!”

I know she’s trying to impress a famous chef, but it seems kind of snobby… Once I bring the first bite of the tart to my mouth, I completely change my mind.

“She really brought out the flavour of the pumpkin. It has an elegant sweetness,” Gran says. She seems surprised, too.

Sakurako-san is silent, but judging from how fast she’s shoveling it into her mouth, I’d say she likes it. She loves pumpkin, after all.

“She used two different kinds of pumpkin for the inside and outside - yukigesho and ajihei.”

“I see. The first bite was so light that I felt like it was missing something, but now that I’ve finished the whole thing, I don’t think that at all. The intensity of the flavour is perfect. I feel like I could eat a ton of these.”

“The pumpkin seeds on top are  a nice accent, too,” Gran adds.

The salty roasted pumpkin seeds on top make for a nice texture. There’s a piece of candy shaped like a bat next to them.

“This is definitely going to win.”

“I agree, but the ranking won’t be decided until the day after tomorrow. It may look like she’s guaranteed to win, but this competition is meant to revitalize the local area. Everyone gets some kind of award.”

“Then why is she putting in so much effort?”

“She wants to be recognized by Chef Mozu. She’s only been working there for half a year, but she’s a very earnest person. She said that she wanted to do her best, so the owner of the store wants to help as much as possible.”

Apparently this woman actually works at a cafe, not a cake shop. The owner didn’t originally intend for her to take it this far.

“Well, I’m sure it’s better for them if the food has a good reputation.”

“For better or worse, places that Chef Mozu reviews usually end up becoming a hot topic for a while.”

Sometimes the restaurants he praises end up becoming so busy that the quality of the food and service declines, and they end up shutting down… He’s ended up being controversial online because of that.

“The city is packed with delicious restaurants, so it’s not a bad thing to be ambitious. Since her food is so good, I can understand why she’d want to see how someone famous likes it,” gran says.

I agree with her. I quickly finish my sample of cake, then bring out the pudding I bought for myself.  It’s a reliable, familiar flavour. It’s delicious again today. I’m sure that tomorrow, and the day after, it’ll be just the same. It’s a flavour that brings back happy memories, no matter how many times I eat it.

However, Asahikawa has a lot of places that sell delicious food. Success depends on the taste, emotional attachment, and publicity. Sweets aren't necessary for survival, so I think they're extra close to peoples' hearts and memories. For me, this Chick Pudding is something that reminds me of my grandma's love. But you need a reason to eat it. It's a luxury, and they have a lot of calories.  Cake in particular makes me think of holidays.

If there's a lot of competing stores, they need a reason other than just "it tastes good." It needs something that adds value. One example that's easy to understand would be the opinion of someone important.

"It'd be nice if Chef Mozu liked it, too," I say, looking down at my empty plate.

This tart might become a special memory for someone, some day. I hope this tart can warm someone's heart, like pudding does for me.

Part 2

In the last few years, the area around Asahikawa station has regained its liveliness. Every time I go there, there's some kind of construction going on. Since the Seibu department store closed down, the scenery has changed completely. I don't feel disoriented at all, though. Still, I'm relieved to see so many people coming and going, with laughter echoing down the street in the clear, autumn weather. For a long time, I'd felt like the city had stagnated, almost like time had stopped here. Looking out at the streets now, I don't get that feeling at all.

It's Halloween today, so the area in front of the station is filled with excitement. There's orange, black, and purple decorations in every window. Overlooked by pumpkins smiling widely, there's restaurants, food stalls, and Jack o lantern carving stations lining the streets. There's a market for fresh vegetables nearby, too. The costume parade isn't until tomorrow, but there's plenty of stage events planned for today. There's a performance by a local yosakoi dance team, and a mini concert hosted by a radio station.

The centerpiece is the “The Decisive Battle for Asahikawa’s Best Sweets! 2017” with Asahikawa’s top 5 confectionary shops proudly selling their treats. It’s hard to choose when there’s so many delicious looking pumpkin sweets lined up.

Sakurako-san is also conflicted, saying “I want to eat everything, but gran will turn into a hannya.”

Even though the contest isn’t for two more hours, the whole dining space around the stage is filled with people. There’s probably people who are looking for Chef Mozu, rather than eating cake. There won’t be anywhere to watch from at this rate. Oh well.

We go to  greet Shouko-san, who is helping Mad  Tea Party today, before looking around at the other booths. As we approach the booth, she rushes over to us.

“Perfect timing!”

“Wh-what are you doing?”

Before I know it, I’m being pulled into a tent decorated with cutout silhouettes that are reminiscent of Alice in Wonderland.

“This is a disaster. The pumpkin pâté sucré for the exhibit have disappeared!”

“Huh?”

Inside the tent, on top of a desk, are several shallow, lidded, plastic containers with the store’s logo on them. Two of them are completely empty, though.

“It’s less than two hours until the contest starts, but we don’t have all the pumpkin we need, and there isn’t enough time to remake it…”

Shouko-san and Mikako Yuuki, the owner of Mad Tea Party, are talking in a panic about the unusual incident while a woman wearing a white’s chef outfit sits on a chair, dumbfounded. She’s a fair skinned woman, who looks to be in her early twenties. I feel like I’ve met her before, but I can’t remember where.

“Wait, Mogiki-san. Don’t give up so quickly. This girl will definitely find them for you, right, Saachan?” Shouko-san says the first half to the patissier girl, and the second half to Sakurako-san.

“I never agreed to that,” Sakurako-san complains.

“If you find them, you can have as many tarts as you want.”

“…Really?”

“Yes, of course. Even if you don’t find it, as long as you help, I’ll treat you to whatever you want next time you come to the store,” the store’s owner adds.

Yuuki-san, the owner of this place, is crying. According to Shouko-san, she runs an Alice in Wonderland themed cafe because she “looks like the Cheshire cat.”

“Well… I don’t have any particular plans, so I don’t mind helping…?” I look over to Sakurako-san. She has her arms crossed and a worried expression on her face. She must think it sounds like a pain, but she’s also tempted by the all-you-can-eat tarts.

“Besides, it wouldn’t feel right to leave this incomprehensible situation alone, right? You love solving puzzles,” Shouko-san adds.

Sakurako-san puts her arms up like she has given up. “Alright, explain the situation in more detail, then.” She still sounds reluctant, but asking for details means she accepted the challenge. I can tell she’s starting to get interested, though. She may be trying to hide it, but I saw her smile for a second.

“Details… What should I say?”

“Why don’t you go over what happened from the time you started making the tarts until now?” Yuuki-san says.

Mogiki-san slowly starts telling us her story in a depressed, monotone voice.

She started making the tarts at 3am in the store’s kitchen. They expected more people than usual due to the event, so a waitress was assigned to help her. She made pumpkin tarts and roll cakes with pumpkin and sweet potato. She made some pumpkin Mont Blanc yesterday, and left them in the fridge.

“All I did was bake, decorate, repeat… It’s been a long time since I had to make so many at once, so I did think it was difficult, but I used to work in a cake shop, so it was nothing I couldn’t handle.”

About an hour ago, at 10:30am, they were brought to this venue.  Mogiki-san put them into containers with lids for transport, then carefully carried each one.

“Shouko-chan, Mogiki-chan, and I are the only ones who have been in the tent. One of us was near the cakes basically the whole time, I think,” Yuuki-san says.

Still, it’s not like the tents were designed with security in mind. Anyone could get in at any time. There were short times where nobody was in the tent because they were talking to people from other booths, or meeting with event staff. Unfortunately, anyone could have stolen them.

“Do you have any idea who could have done this? A rival store, for example?” Sakurako-san asks, looking at the other tents.

“Well… I shouldn’t be saying this, but the results have already been decided. Mad Tea Party is getting the ‘makes parties fun’ award. There are other awards like ‘best value for your money award’ and ‘surprising pumpkin award.’ It’s just supposed to give everyone an award without actually making a real ranking. The judging is just for show. It’s stupid.” Yuuki-san says in a hushed voice. “So there’s no reason to sabotage other stores.”

“No, it could still be the work of a store that didn’t get into the finals. Who are your enemies? Can you think of anyone who doesn’t like you, or holds a grudge against you? You have a direct personality, so you must have a lot of enemies,” Sakurako-san says to Yuuki-san.

Yuuki-san forces a smile. She has short hair and thick eyebrows. Her eyes are slanted, like a cat’s… She doesn’t look like a kind person.

“Yes… As you said, there are people who hate me. My husband in particular, since we’re in the middle of getting a divorce.”

“I don’t think he’s brave enough to do something like this,” Shouko-san adds.

Yuuki-san seems to agree. “It’s not like I don’t have other people who dislike me, but I can’t think of anyone who would harass me on a day like today. This isn’t my first time attending this event, either.”

“I see… Then what about the patissier? Can you think of anyone?” Sakurako-san asks Mogiki-san, who is absentmindedly sitting at the back of the tent.

She shakes her head. “I’m from Asahikawa, but I lived in Tokyo until half a year ago. I’m not particularly close with anyone here.”

“Why? You don’t have any acquaintances from before you moved to Tokyo?”

“It’s not that I don’t, but… In the past year, I lost both my brother and my mom. I haven’t been in the mood to have fun…” Mogiki-san lowers her head and clenches her fists.

Yuuki-san gently pats Sakurako-san on the back and leads us out of the tent.

“Mogiki-chan’s older brother was a chef, so the two of them were going to open a restaurant in Tokyo together. He committed suicide recently, though. Just after that, her mother died of an illness… I knew her mother, and I knew she had the skills, so I decided to hire her temporarily.”

Mogiki-san also lost her father at a young age. When she saw how worn out Mogiki-san was at her mother’s funeral, Yuuki-san felt as though she had to reach out.

“Making sweets is my purpose in life, so I thought if she worked with me, she’d get back on her feet eventually. I might’ve been a bit pushy, but at least she has a reason to get out of bed every morning, right?”

“So this is a big day for her?”

Yuuki-san nods deeply. “Yeah, her cakes are truly amazing. Our store has never really focused on cake before, though. But when she said she wanted to enter the exhibit… I wanted her to do whatever she pleased.”

If she really does get a good evaluation from Chef Mozu, it’ll really help boost her self confidence.

“Besides, it increases my sales. It’s a win-win. So in order for this story to end happily ever after, we have to find those cakes.” Yuuki-san continues, saying she’d like to help look personally, but she can’t due to meetings for the event, and sales at the booth. More staff from the store will arrive soon, but right now, she can’t leave.

“I’ve heard tales of your heroics from Shouko-san. Please. Please find the cakes.” She somehow doesn’t seem like the type to bow, so seeing Yuuki-san asking for our help so sincerely takes me

by surprise a bit. I guess it just shows how much she cares about Mogiki-san, though.

"…Five." Sakurako-san soon mutters under her breath.

"Hm?"

"I'll do it for five tarts."

"…Fine. Five it is. I'll add two roll cakes and mont blancs, as well." Yuuki-san says, nodding. Sakurako-san grins.

I whisper to her that gran's going to be angry if she eats that much. "What? Two of them are for you," she says with a wink.

Okay, but 3 is still too many… I also never even said I'd help her, not that I was planning on leaving her behind. I'm happier that she considers me her partner than I am about getting sweets. Oh, that's right. We didn't find a corpse today. The air smells like butter and cream, rather than the putrid smell of rotting flesh.

Part 3

Since Mogiki-san is already exhausted, Shouko-san stays at the booth to help handle sales. They may not have any tarts right now, but they still have roll cakes and mont blancs. Finding the cakes with just the two of us is going to be a challenge. All the booths are in tents with 3 sides, and they're each separate from each other, so it'll be hard to see inside of any of them. We decide to visit the nearby booths for now.

"Sorry, we're busy getting set up."

We ask the person at the chiffon cake shop with the bob-cut if they saw anyone suspicious. As I expected, they shake their head. I look down at the pumpkin chiffon cakes. They seem like something that Kougami would like. I sigh.

"It would be nice if they had security cameras around here," a different store owner says, shrugging their shoulders. "So which store was it?"

"Um, it was Mad Tea Party. The pumpkin pate sucres were taken."

"…Oh, Yuuki-san's place."

As soon as I mention the name of the store, the two owners both make a strange expression.

“Did you remember something?”

“No… I just…” The bob-cut employee says with a forced smile.

“Just what? If you know something, spit it out. We were just hired to find the cakes. It’s not like we’re friends of the owner or anything,” Sakurako-san says.

The other employee timidly starts to speak. “It’s about the vice president of the executive committee for today’s event, Uchimura-san from the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. There’s a rumor that he’s Yuuki-san’s boyfriend. They also say that he invested in her cafe, so that’s the only reason they’re ranked so high in this event.”

“Oh? I heard she’s in the middle of a divorce.”

When Sakurako-san says it’s the first she’s heard of it, the two from the other booth say, “that’s the reason she’s getting a divorce” with an evil smile.

“Uchimura-san is already nearly seventy years old, but he’s infatuated with Yuuki-san. Everyone says he’s going to marry her after the divorce. It’s just a bunch of rumors, but nobody would be surprised if it really happens. Also, I think even if someone saw the culprit you’re looking for, they’ll probably protect them.”

I find myself scowling while listening to the story. Unfortunately, no matter how many stalls we visit, everyone just says the same thing. This problem is more deeply rooted than I thought. Time keeps ticking by without us finding the cakes. It can’t be helped, so we head back to Mad Tea Party’s booth.

Shouko-san is standing out front. “Did you find them?” She asks, her expression full of hope. I shake my head.

“I see…”

She quickly turns despondent. I’m too scared to go into the tent and see Mogiki-san’s reaction. Just then, Yuuki-san returns with two more helpers.

“Perfect timing. I wanted to talk with you for a minute,” Sakurako-san tells Yuuki-san.

We leave the booth and head to the water fountain at the 8 Jodori shopping park. Yuuki-san and Shouko-san both came with us.

It’d be hard to talk at the stall.

“I talked with the executive committee just now. If we can’t find them, we can use a replacement cake. The store staff can bring a cake that looks exactly the same,” Yuuki-san says, sitting on the black and white tile around the fountain.

Shouko-san sits next to her.

“I feel bad for Mogiki-chan, but… Just making it this far is plenty impressive.”

“Is it really impressive?” Sakurako-san mutters.

“…What do you mean?” Yuuki-san glares suspiciously at Sakurako-san and I.

“We heard from the other shops. They don’t trust you and Mr. Uchimura. Way to go,” Sakurako-san says bluntly. Shouko-san and Yuuki-san’s expressions stiffen.

The air turns tense in an instant.

“I’m not saying that I don’t get treated differently, but this time is different. I wanted her to enter this contest to prove that.”

“Oh? Then you really were getting special treatment?”

“I don’t think so, and I definitely didn’t ask for it. Also, he isn’t my boyfriend.”

To be honest, I’m not convinced. Why would a complete stranger give her special treatment if she never asked for it? Shouko-san must have seen the doubt on my face, because she shakes her head regretfully.

“What do you mean?” Sakurako-san asks.

“There’s a lot of reasons. It’s better if you don’t ask,” Shouko-san gently scolds her.

“Well… I guess I don’t mind telling you. You two don’t seem like the type of gossip. I’d hate for you to misunderstand and jump to your own conclusions.”

Shouko-san gently touches Yuuki-san’s arm with a look of concern on her face. Yuuki-san takes a deep breath.

“He really isn’t my boyfriend… Because he’s my biological father. For various reasons, he can’t publicly recognize me as his child, but he does acknowledge and love me.”

“Ah… I… I see.”

I feel like I've heard too much already. Shouko-san glares at me, even though Sakurako-san is the one who asked.

"I don't want to get in trouble, so don't tell anyone. I'm happy with our current relationship, and I don't particularly mind the gossip and questions. I just don't listen to people who have nothing nice to say."

"You must be a strong person… To stay quiet about this."

People tend to pay more attention to the things they don't want to listen to.

"I just have a bad personality," she snickers.

Sakurako-san nods. "It doesn't make a difference. You'll be alienated either way."

"But there's nothing I can do about it. I can't change who my parents are, or the means I use to achieve my goals. I'd rather have a few close friends than a hundred people who just like me," Yuuki-san says, wrapping her arms around Shouko-san.

If I could, I'd like it if 100 people liked me. I think Shouko-san is liked by just about everyone.

"That being said, I'm sure there are lots of people who hold a grudge against me… But this time, the harassment has gone way too far. I'll have to wait and see what happens. I don't want to cause too much trouble for my dad."

Even if Yuuki-san is fine with it, she must still feel bad for Mogiki-san. I'm sure she feels responsible.

"…Anyway, we still have 40 minutes. Let's search some more."

I check my phone to see that there's exactly 42 minutes until the contest starts. We'll just have to hope things turn around. I want to find at least one tart, so Mogiki-san can fulfill her dream.

But how can we find tarts in such a busy area?

"Maybe they're… In the garbage bin?"

"I doubt it. They'd stand out too much."

"Good point."

There's two cases full of tarts missing. That's 4 dozen tarts in total.

"But… I want to at least find a clue."

She went through all the effort of making all those tarts at 3am. She put all her effort into them, just for this moment. It's also a shame for so many treats to be wasted instead of having people enjoy them.

"Besides… I can't stand seeing how sad she is." I recall Mogiki-san's exhausted face as we walk through the crowds. Her dark eyes, sinking into despair…

"Oh!"

"What?"

"That's right… I just remembered something. About the cemetery." I subconsciously stop walking. Sakurako-san raises one eyebrow, confused.

"Back when I visited my grandma's grave. Her hairstyle and clothes are different since she's cooking today so I didn't recognize her at first, but she was at a grave, too."

"At the Nagayama Cemetery?"

"Yeah."

I knew I'd seen her somewhere. Her expression left an impact on me since it pulled at my heart.

"…The grave was really clean, so I think it was probably her family. She looked lost in thought, probably because of how much is riding on this event."

Now I feel even more motivated to find the tarts.

"Why does she care so much about the results of the competition when the rankings are decided from the start?"

"Isn't it because of Chef Mozu? Don't you know him?"

Sakurako-san frowns, like she has no idea. I guess not. Chef Mozu is the most famous cook in Hokkaido.

"Just a thumbs up from him is enough to draw crowds of people to a shop. He's handsome, it's interesting when he speaks, and he cares a lot about using Hokkaido's local ingredients, so he's like a hero to the people of Hokkaido."

His words and actions really do have an economic effect.

"He can also have a sharp tongue, though. Shops he criticizes usually end up going out of business."

"Oh?"

“Word spreads quickly over social media now. How should I put it… He has a lot of power over how information spreads. Like he’s good at using people’s voices. That’s why there’s also a lot of people who are against him, he even gets death threats.” Minor controversies like that are in high demand in entertainment, and even in the news.

“But… He’s a chef, right?”

“That’s right. My chef grandpa speaks well of him, too.” His cooking skills are the real deal, of course. My mom owns several of his recipe books.

“A chef getting frequent death threats… The world is pretty dangerous these days.” Sakurako-san tilts her head to the side, looking at the wall next to her.

There’s a poster of Chef Mozu there. It’s advertising today’s event, with a big picture of him looking smug.

## Part 4

For the next 40 minutes, we frantically run around to check any place we can think of. I look through the trash cans, and ask the security guards if they’ve seen anything suspicious. Unfortunately, we don’t even find a trace of the tart thief. I’m powerless to stop time from ticking on, and eventually, the event begins.

All of the Halloween sweets look delicious. There’s small pumpkins filled with fruit gratin, pumpkin pies, and more. …It’s frustrating that Mogiki-san’s pâte sucrée are the only things missing. There are 5 judges. There’s the mayor, a popular entertainer, the president from the chamber of commerce, and a popular reporter. Out of all of them, Chef Mozu is the biggest hit. He fills the venue with laughter.

“C’mon, let’s change the seating order! I don’t know what to say after the food reporter from Fukuyama… Having said that, using the pumpkin as a bowl is both gorgeous and impactful.”

Even though he didn’t seem to like it, Chef Mozu gives an enthusiastic speech about the fruit gratin in a pumpkin. He seems to

have a habit of tilting his head when he talks. Each time he does, the women in the crowd cheer “he’s so cute!”

“The top of the gratin has a cute jack o 'lantern face drawn on it… It makes it exciting to open the pumpkin’s lid! It’s a simple thing, but I think it’s important. Sweets are supposed to make people happy. Ahh, and there’s yuzu peel in it… No wonder it smells so nice.”

To be honest, I don’t like Chef Mozu very much, but I do agree with him here. Sweets are meant to be enjoyable to eat. But that just makes me feel even sadder right now. There’s someone out here crying because her sweets went missing.

Finally, it’s Mad Tea Party’s turn. They told the judges beforehand about what happened, and asked them to eat a tart that just looked the same. Thankfully everyone knows how it was supposed to taste and what ingredients were supposed to be used. They all have positive things to say. Chef Mozu is the same. His comment is bland, but it can’t be helped since he hasn’t actually tried the real sweet. Nobody disparages it, but naturally, they don’t give rave reviews either. Mogiki-san listens to the review with her back turned.

“And… Oh, Mad Tea Party… The patissier is a woman named Tou-san. Wait no, it’s Mogiki-san, isn’t it? What an unusual name!”

The topic has already moved on from the tarts. Mogiki-san covers her ears with her hands, as if she wants to run away from the stage.

“There’s always more chances,” Yuuki-san says, comfortingly patting Mogiki-san.

Then, just as planned, each shop gets their own meaningless award. Well… At least it’s a result that doesn’t hurt anyone. Sakurako-san has had a bit of a suspicious look on her face the whole time. Mad Tea Party continues to sell roll cakes and mont blanc while giving an evasive excuse about the award winning tarts being sold out. After an hour, all the sweets at the booth are sold out. Other booths are also gradually starting to tidy up. The two people who came to help have to head back to the store, so Shouko-san buys everyone coffee while we pack up. The coffee is black, so I pretend to

sip it little by little so nobody finds out I can't handle it. We're all being crushed by exhaustion.

"…I'm sorry we couldn't find them," I say, unable to bear the silence.

"No, thank you for helping us look," Mogiki-san says, shaking her head with a downcast look.

"I'm really grateful, so don't worry about it. It's okay, I know the tarts that went missing are really delicious. Chef Mozu gave that tepid comment… It's a bit disappointing, but I guess it still counts as a happy ending." Yuuki-san's cheerful voice cuts through the gloomy atmosphere.

"Nobody thinks that," Sakurako-san replies coldly.

"We can't change the outcome of the contest, but we haven't even found the tarts. Is this really a happy ending?"

She never changes. Why can't she read the mood?

"Sakurako-san." I pull on her sleeve to tell her to stop. She's the only one drinking hot chocolate.

"You really don't want to know who the Knave of Hearts is? Who would steal the tarts?"

"Knowing isn't everything," Shouko-san says, softly scolding Sakurako-san.

Sakurako-san is referencing the story about the Queen's tarts in Alice in Wonderland.

"I see. The Queen of Hearts is quite lenient. What do you think?" Sakurako-san asks Mogiki-san.

"…It's fine. It's over now," Mogiki-san answers with a deep sigh while leaning back in her chair with her coffee on her lap.

"Didn't you make a pledge at your dead family members' grave?" Sakurako-san asks while running her finger along the edge of an empty container.

"How do you know that?" Mogiki-san is clearly startled.

"Actually… I was visiting my grandma's grave in Nagayama, too," I confess. I feel guilty, like I saw something I shouldn't have.

"Now that you mention it, I did pass a boy. I see… you must be the one who left the Chick Pudding."

"Yeah, that was me."

When you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes back - or in this case, I stared at her and she stared at me, too.

“I used to bring that pudding to her when I visited her in the hospital.”

“I see… You grandma must have been happy. I brought my tarts to leave at the cemetery,” she says with a lonely smile.

“Your tarts are so important to you that you leave them for a corpse? And you’re giving up on finding them that easily?” Sakurako-san says defiantly. “It’s weird, isn’t it? 4 dozen tarts just vanished into thin air. That’s a significant amount. 48 whole tarts. Not even a jabberwock could eat that much.”

Sakurako-san is really insistent on finding out where those tarts went. I stuff a pumpkin youkan into Sakurako-san’s mouth. I bought them for my mom, but there’s no helping it. Please, I’m begging her to just shut up.

“It’s a lot of tarts. They have a short shelf life, and can easily be bought online. There’s no value in reselling them. It’s a lot of food to dispose of, plus it would be nearly impossible to carry that much without drawing attention to yourself.” She keeps talking while chewing the youkan. She must think I was just sharing some snacks with her. What a disaster.

Yuuki-san steps in to stop Sakurako-san from hounding Mogiki-san. “You’ve realized that there are actually lots of people who would like to harass me, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I have. Don’t you think there would be too high of a risk of getting caught, though? If you seriously think that every person on the planet hates you, I’d suggest you go to therapy,” Sakurako-san says, pushing Yuuki-san aside.

There are definitely too many mysteries surrounding this theft. It’s hard to admit, but everything Sakurako-san has said is true.

“It doesn’t sit right with me when the bones don’t connect. Let’s try going over it from the beginning again.”

“I already told you everything.”

“I want to know more of the details.”

“Even if you ask that…”

“Anything is fine. Tell me whatever comes to mind.”

Mogiki-san looks exhausted from all of Sakurako-san's questioning. "Fine," she says with a sigh.

A new comedy show is beginning on the stage. The audience immediately bursts out laughing. Contrary to the atmosphere of the venue, we gather around the empty cases that used to contain sweets, and discuss the theft. The air smells even more bitter than black coffee.

## Part 5

She recounts the same story as before. There's basically nothing different about it.

"Was it hard to go to work so early in the morning?"

"Yes… While I did have to get up early, I enjoy my work… Plus I was under a lot of stress." She starts off speaking nervously, but eventually seems to feel more sure of herself.

"Did you run into any trouble?"

"Yeah, I did. I was on edge because of how stressed I was… And Mutsuki-san, who was helping me, was even more nervous than I was, causing her to make a mistake."

"What happened?"

"She dropped a tray of candy decorations on the floor. They broke, so we couldn't use any of them anymore," Mogiki-san says sadly.

She planned to put all the crunchy candy bats on at once, but they were unusable. She hurried to try to make new ones, but it was almost time to bring the tarts to the venue. It would have been fine to put them on once they got there, though. Mogiki-san loaded all the containers of tarts into her car, and left for the venue alone.

"Did you stop anywhere along the way?"

"I bought some tea at the convenience store, but that's it."

"And who transported the containers once you arrived at the venue?"

"I did that, too," Mogiki-san says, raising her hand.

"I see… Then who checked the containers that you brought in?"

Yuuki-san and Mogiki-san both look at each other.

“Actually… Nobody checked the containers after we arrived, since we were so busy setting up the booth… About 5-10 minutes after we brought them to the booth, we realized that the tarts were missing.”

“Where were the tarts while you were setting up?”

“They were with all the other cakes, in the car.”

“Who had the keys to the car?”

“The owner and I.”

“I see. Hmm…” Sakurako-san folds her arms.

“Did you figure something out?”

Sakurako-san nods with a slightly satisfied look on her face. “In that case, the culprit is most likely one of you two.”

“…Huh?”

It takes a second for everyone to comprehend the meaning of those words. Or rather, nobody knows what to say next. The roars of excitement from the venue bring us back to our senses.

“Hold on. Why would either of us do that?!”

“Yeah! Why would I hide my own tarts?!” Mogiki-san gradually raises her voice, despite speaking so calmly and patiently until now.

“Exactly, and I would never do something like that. There’s no point! It’d just be a waste of four dozen cakes! That’s a huge loss for me!”

“It’s true, there’s no advantage for you. In that case, there must be someone who was negatively affected by the existence of those tarts,” Sakurako-san says. She looks at Mogiki-san like she’s asking for her thoughts.

“Then… Why is one of us the culprit?”

“It’s simple. No one else had contact with the tarts.”

“Wait. It could have been Mutsuki-chan,” Yuuki-san says. That’s the name of the woman who helped make all the cakes. She broke the candy toppings, as well.

“Maybe she was getting revenge for being blamed for a mistake Mogiki-chan made.”

“How could such a timid person who’s so anxious about making a mistake do something so big?” Sakurako-san snorts, rejecting the idea. “Haven’t you noticed? The only time you can be certain the tarts

were present was at the store. Were the tarts ever in the containers that were transported in the car in the first place?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Mogiki-san would have noticed if the tarts weren’t inside when she carried the containers!” Yuuki-san objects with a sharp tone.

“Exactly. Good answer,” Sakurako-san says with a soft clap.

The gesture feels mocking.

“If the containers were empty, the person carrying them would have noticed. That means there’s only one possibility: the person carrying it lied.”

“…What are you saying?” Yuuki-san looks at Mogiki-san in surprise.

It’s true, she should have noticed if the cases were empty, since she’s the one who brought them all the way here.

“I’m sorry, I was wondering about that, too…” Shouko-san says shyly.

“The containers were still there, right? That means the culprit would have only moved the tarts. They would have had to move all 48 of them to a different container without anyone noticing. Do you think that’s likely?”

“Well… Maybe they made preparations beforehand, and already had identical containers ready. Yeah, that must be it. There’s no way that Mogiki-chan is the culprit. She worked so hard for today…”

I can’t deny the possibility that they’re just containers that look the same, but that doesn’t explain why she didn’t notice that the container was too light. She handles those containers on a regular basis, so it isn’t like she didn’t know how heavy they should be.

“I’ve had my doubts all along. Why are you so obsessed with Mozu? It’s not your store, and the results were fixed from the start. Maybe you just wanted to test your skill, or maybe you wanted to get that man’s attention-”

“That’s not true!” Mogiki-san shouts with rage, glaring at Sakurako-san.

“I suppose so. You turned your back to him and pretended like you weren’t listening to him before… I thought that it was because

you were upset about your tarts going missing, but if that were the case, you wouldn't be so angry right now."

"..."

Was she right, or off the mark…? Mogiki-san glares at Sakurako-san without giving an answer.

"I'll ask you something else, then. Whose grave did you visit yesterday?"

"...That's private," Mogiki-san replies quietly.

"That may be so, but I still want to know. I spent my precious day off on this nonsense. Telling me that much won't hurt you. Or did your brother tell you from beyond the grave to never tell anyone about yourself?"

"H-how did you know I was visiting my brother?" Mogiki-san blinks in surprise.

"I didn't. I just had a 50/50 chance," Sakurako-san says, like she's feigning ignorance.

Judging from Mogiki-san's frown, she's realized that it's just a bluff. Sakurako-san is smiling a bit.

"Well, it wasn't just a wild guess… There's one thing that's been on my mind - your background. You were going to open a store with your brother, but he committed suicide just before you could, right?"

"...To be precise, he left a suicide note and disappeared. His body was never found." Mogiki-san nods sadly. Yuuki-san glares at Sakurako-san for bringing up her brother again.

"Why did he do that?"

"How could you ask that?! I don't care if you're curious, that's just inconsiderate and cruel!!"

"I won't deny that. But she has gotten all these people wrapped up in her scheme while she played the victim. She's just as inconsiderate as I am."

"Hey, Sakurako-san…"

No matter what the circumstances, she has to choose her words better. I pull on her sleeve, but she brushes me aside without even looking at me.

"You… Are a horrible person."

“Call me what you want, I just want to know why your brother disappeared,” Sakurako-san says, like inconsiderateness personified.

“...Chef Mozu wrote horrible things about my brother’s cooking in his email newsletter. As a result, the place he was working lost a lot of customers, and we had to delay the grand opening of our own store,” Mogiki-san says with disgust.

“This is the story of a young, ambitious chef who was about to open his own restaurant. The food wasn’t good at all. It looked nice, but it was completely tasteless. I hope people like this aren’t going to carry the future of Japan’s cuisine on their backs…” The review said things like that.

Because of the harsh criticism, the newsletter spread like wildfire on social media. The suppliers they had gone all around Japan to secure contracts with immediately terminated their relationship with the siblings. The brother, who was an earnest person, left a note saying that he couldn’t bring himself to look his sister in the eye anymore, and vanished. The body was never found, so they put his chef’s hat in the grave so that it wouldn’t be empty.

“You don’t think it was a fair assessment, then?”

“Yes, there’s no mistaking it. That’s what made me doubt Chef Mozu’s opinion. I had no doubts about my brother’s cooking ability. I wasn’t going easy on him just because we were related. Otherwise, I never would have opened a restaurant with him.”

Mogiki-san shows us how she can easily find results about her brother with a simple search. “Tastes like ash,” “blasphemy against cooking,” “it’s hard to believe that such high quality ingredients can have so little flavour,” “it looks and smells good, but it’s not good to eat. The food should just be a display model.” Even seeing the words with my own eyes, I can’t believe it.

“Right… So with that in mind, you decided to meet with Chef Mozu,” Sakurako-san says to Yuuki-san, crossing her arms and snorting.

“Meet him…? How could I?”

“What are you talking about? You can just ask your father,” Sakurako-san says with a shrug.

“No way. I could never ask my father to use his position like that. I absolutely can’t ask him,” Yuuki-san hurriedly shakes her head.

I catch a glimpse of her strong will.

“I see. Well, sometimes exceptions should be made. You don’t really care about other people’s opinions, right? If you think it’s in this girl’s best interest, ask your father. Otherwise, this case will never come to a proper conclusion.”

“...I understand.”

Yuuki-san is silent for a moment, with a grim expression. Soon, she nods as if she’s made up her mind, and picks up her cell phone.

## Part 6

Thanks to the arrangements Yuuki-san’s father made, we’re given access to the tent that Chef Mozu is using.

“I don’t do autographs or group pictures,”

He says bluntly without even turning to look at us or taking his earbuds out. He looks like he’s getting ready to leave.

“We don’t need them, anyway.” Sakurako-san storms over to him and violently yanks out his earbuds without any hesitation.

“What the– Oh… You’re…?”

As he turns around to glare at Sakurako-san, he notices Mogiki-san behind her. His expression stiffens.

“I’m Mogiki… From Mad Tea Party,” she greets him with her lips stiff, as if holding back her anger.

“I see… You look just like your brother,” Chef Mozu says, casting his gaze downward.

“You remember him?”

“Yeah… There’s no way I could forget. I did something truly horrible to him,” he says, choking back tears. He sounds truly sad and remorseful.

“If you’re going to feel bad about it, then why did you say all of that?!” In sharp contrast to Chef Mozu, Mogiki-san’s voice is full of anger.

“Well…”

“Hold on, I didn’t come here to watch you fight. There’s something on my mind,” Sakurako-san interrupts.

Chef Mozu seems to be at a loss for words, and Mogiki-san is attempting to grab him.

“I noticed something earlier when I saw you up on the stage. You gave a very clear answer when you were asked what is most important in cooking, but your opinion seemed strange. So I’d like to ask you, what do you actually think is most important?” Sakurako-san says, looking at all of us.

“It has to be the taste, doesn’t it?” Nobody answers, so I timidly speak up. Sakurako-san grins.

“That’s right, but at the event earlier, this man said something about the scent and decorations and such. He never mentioned the all-important taste. His cooking abilities and palette were even praised by the boy’s grandpa who used to be a chef.  So, the answer is simple. You don’t know what it tasted like,” Sakurako-san says, looking straight at chef Mozu.

Chef Mozu looks stressed.

“You wrote that Mogiki’s brother’s cooking was flavourless, and you aren’t talking about flavour at all now. That’s why I think the problem isn’t with the food, but with you.”

“...”

Chef Mozu doesn’t reply, but that also means he isn’t denying it.

“You have dysgeusia. It makes sense, if you think about it. You didn’t mean to disrespect that girl’s brother or his cooking. You really did think it tasted ‘like ash’ back then.”

“...It’s been a year already. The doctors don’t know what caused it. They said it might be stress, but they don’t know for sure.”

“You have to be… Kidding…” Shouko-san says in surprise.

For the past year, he has still been performing on cooking shows, and reviewing food.

“I judged the taste to some extent based on the culinary skill, quality of the ingredients, and scent. At first, I thought it was temporary, and waited for it to go away on its own. When it didn’t, I tried all kinds of treatments, but nothing helped.”

“What about now?!” Yuuki-san asks in surprise.

As far as I know, nobody noticed during the contest today that he can't taste anything.

"Taste disorders affect roughly 250 000 people in Japan each year. There are several causes, but it's not a rare condition. Symptoms usually appear suddenly."

"Yeah… And the symptoms vary, too. I didn't completely lose my ability to taste, it's just that everything tastes bad," Chef Mozu continues.

"I didn't notice that something was wrong until a while after the symptoms started. That's why I gave him a bad review. By the time I realized that I was sick, it was too late, and he already had a bad reputation."

He immediately tried to apologize, but Mogiki-san's brother had already disappeared.

"I'm so sorry! I should have apologized to his family sooner!" Chef Mozu grovels on the ground for forgiveness.

"Stop it… Apologizing won't bring my brother back," Mogiki-san says in disgust. Chef Mozu raises his head.

"The internet loses interest in things quickly. I figured that as soon as a more interesting story came up, everyone would forget about one bad review. I never expected it to cause such a fuss."

Does he not realize how much influence he has? Social media allows things like this to spread explosively.

"Also… I know it's cowardly, but I felt like, as a chef and food critic, I had to hide my disorder."

As a result, he couldn't comment on the taste, as Sakurako-san pointed out. Still, I have to give him credit for hiding it so well that nobody has noticed.

"...So you're saying that no matter what you eat, it'll never taste good?" Shouko-san asks.

Chef Mozu nods sadly.

"The scent, texture, and appearance are important in cooking, too, so I can tell if something *should* taste good."

He has to eat things that he can't even taste all day, every day, while still putting on a smile. It sounds hard. Above all else, not being able to taste good food is a huge misfortune.

“...I think it’s about time I give up. I’ve heard that once a taste disorder has gone on for too long, your taste buds won’t ever recover… Perhaps it’s fate that I came here today.”

Chef Mozu stands up, and says that he’ll officially announce that he has dysgeusia. On that day, when he hurt Mogiki-san’s brother, he shouldn’t have been working in the food industry at all.

“To you, I must look like a monster… But I’m grateful. I’m glad I met you today. It’s truly unfortunate that I couldn’t eat that tart.” Chef Mozu bows deeply to Mogiki-san.

“No, I’m glad.”

I was worried about what she’d say since she’s been silent for so long, with her lip trembling with anger. However, rather than blame Chef Mozu, Mogiki-san just mutters sadly.

“I’m glad you didn’t eat the tart… Since I’m the one that’s the monster.”

“You are?”

Chef Mozu raises his head in confusion. Mogiki-san nods.

“Yes… After all, I put poison in that tart.”

## Part 7

“All the tarts are in a garbage bag, hidden under a seat in the car. I thought I could sneakily throw them away at a convenience store or something, but there’s too many. Besides, most of the convenience stores have moved their garbage cans inside so people don’t throw away their household garbage in them,” Mogiki-san says indifferently while staring at the empty containers.

“Just as Kujou-san said, the containers were empty from the start. I disposed of the tarts as soon as I left the store.”

“Why would you do that?!” Yuuki-san shouts.

It’s only natural. We were deceived.

“I hate Mozu. Isn’t that obvious? He killed my brother. I wanted revenge.”

“So you poisoned the tarts?”

“Yes. Only one of the tarts that was being judged was poisoned. Well, I say poison, but it wouldn’t kill him. I just added a lot of

laxatives. They were prescribed to my mother when she was ill."

Her mother said that 5 or 6 drops was enough to make her stomach hurt.. Mogiki-san tells us that she added 20-30 drops to the tart with an evil grin. That would definitely cause some serious abdominal pain.

"When Mutsuki-san, the assistant, dropped the candy decorations, I lost track of which tart was laced. If I left things as they were, some other judge or guest would become the victim, and most importantly, Mozu wouldn't suffer. I didn't know what to do," Mogiki-san forces the words out of her throat.

She couldn't harm her customers. That would cause trouble for Yuuki-san.

"It'd be a shame if I missed my chance to torment Mozu, so I quickly prepared another tart that was full of laxatives… But as I was rushing out of the store, I saw a kind father walking while holding hands with his child. It brought me back to my senses."

If things continued like that, it wouldn't just be Mozu, but another innocent person like them that would be put through pain.

"My father was always ill and stayed at home, so my mother worked instead. But you know… My father did what he could, so he often made french toast for my brother and I. It… Was always really delicious," Mogiki-san smiles softly.

I can tell just from her smile how good her father's french toast must have been.

"I was happy. My brother and I would get so excited when we smelled the butter and egg mixture cooking at 3 o'clock each afternoon. Even now… I still make french toast whenever I'm stressed or worried about something. But I still can't replicate the flavour my father made…"

Large teardrops start to run down her cheeks as she confesses.

"My brother and I wanted to make other people happy, the same way our father made us happy. That's why I became a pastry chef. So my tarts absolutely shouldn't be used to hurt people, or to get revenge!" Mogiki-san bursts into tears.

It was hard for her to throw away all the sweets that she worked hard to make, and she felt sorry for putting Yuuki-san through all the

stress of losing the tarts… But she couldn't bring herself to poison someone.

"So the Knave of Hearts never existed," Sakurako-san laughs.

Thanks to her, we ran all around the area for no reason.

"I'm truly sorry… For not telling you the truth from the beginning." Mogiki-san bows deeply to us and Yuuki-san. Yuuki-san stares at her for a moment, then starts to laugh.

"Owner…?"

I thought she'd be angry. Or maybe she's just so angry that she can't help but laugh. Regardless of the reason, she's laughing so hard that she's holding her stomach.

"Ahaha! A laxative, of all things! The venue would have been in total chaos!"

"That… Isn't something to laugh about." Shouko-san looks uncomfortable due to her friend's erratic behaviour.

"Why shouldn't I laugh? Nobody ate the poisoned tarts! That guy apologized to her, too. Why aren't you laughing? It's a happy ending!" Yuuki-san says, slapping me on the back.

It kind of hurts, but I start to feel like laughing, too. I think Yuuki-san is saying that we should laugh instead of cry, no matter how sad we are. Before long, Mogiki-san starts to cry and laugh at the same time. Shouko-san and Chef Mozu join in, too. I can see a smile creep across Sakurako-san's lips. Laughter is wonderful.

Mogiki-san reaches out a hand to Chef Mozu. Of course, just this much isn't enough for them to fully reconcile after what happened to her brother, but it's a good first step.

"I'll use the TV broadcast of this event to announce my dysgeusia, and formally apologize to you, Mogiki-kun," Chef Mozu says after everyone has calmed down.

"Is that… Really okay?" Mogiki-san says with a frown.

Chef Mozu nods. In the same moment, Sakurako-san reaches for his neck.

"Wait. Have you… Had pain around your cervical vertebrae for the past 1-2 years?"

"What?"

“I noticed that when you talk, you have a habit of tilting your head to the side. Were you born that way?”

“Oh… No, I hurt my neck around 2 years ago, when I went to a river for a shoot. The way I stand when I cook puts a lot of strain on my neck, too, so it never really got better.”

Chef Mozu turns his head back and forth, which makes a cracking sound.

“I knew it. A prolonged injury is one possible cause for dysgeusia. You should really get proper treatment for your neck. Who knows, maybe your sense of taste will come back.”

I think Sakurako-san is trying to say that it’s too early for him to give up.

“I’m fine with it, even if it doesn’t come back,” Chef Mozu replies. “As I am now, I feel like I’ve lost something deeply important to me. I hope I don’t get better, to honour Mogiki-kun and her brother.”

“I’m happy you think that way, but I still hate you… Nothing you do will bring my brother back, but…”

Mogiki-san grabs the cuff of Chef Mozu’s shirt. I thought she might be able to forgive him now, but her resolve is firm.

“Maybe you’ll receive another death threat, hahaha.”

Chef Mozu smiles. It wasn’t funny at all, but he still laughs it off. Accepting anything she says is one way he’s atoning for what happened to her brother.

“No matter what, Humpty Dumpty can’t ever be put back together again.”

Final Part

Chef Mozu walks straight to the TV crew. He confesses his dysgeusia to everyone. He talks about how he has lied to countless people over the past year, and about what happened to Chef Mogiki. Then, he asks if anyone knows anything about Chef Mogiki. Maybe he really did just go missing, and someone has seen him. That’s the last thing he says before leaving show business.

Lots of people love Chef Mozu, but lots of people hate him, too. A lot of different opinions were formed after his confession. He got

some threatening letters, so the police had to get involved. Surprisingly, the world still held a favourable opinion of him. He got lots of tips about Chef Mogiki.

It turns out that there's a man matching Chef Mogiki's description studying in France. He's alive. Apparently a local cook saved Chef Mogiki's life after he tried to commit suicide. He's been desperately studying cooking in France for the past year in an effort to dedicate the rest of his life to the path he's chosen. Once his skills improve, he'll return to Japan one day. Chef Mozu apologized to him. Once Chef Mogiki's training is complete and he returns home, Chef Mozu wants to entrust his business to Chef Mogiki. He said that he hopes Chef Mogiki's sister will come, too. That wish was fulfilled exactly 5 years after the day we searched for the Knave of Hearts. The menu at the new shop, owned by all three of them, contains pumpkin pâte sucrée, and nostalgic french toast.

Chef Mozu thought about leaving the TV industry, but even after making his dysgeusia public, his amount of work didn't decrease. Unfortunately, he didn't recover from his illness, even after many years. Despite his ongoing illness, he kept up with appearances on TV, spread awareness that taste disorders are a common occurrence, wrote about his story, released recipe books for people with the same disorder as him, and stayed enthusiastically involved in the food industry. People have started calling him "the Beethoven of the culinary world," but it embarasses him so he always tells people to stop.

Seeing him reminds me of the significance of food, as well as how much love goes into making it. Just like the memories I have about pudding, or the Mogiki siblings' french toast. Whenever I eat pumpkin, I think about that Halloween that I spent with Sakurako-san. The autumn I was in my second year of high school. The last autumn we spent smiling together.

# Third Bone: The Teddy Bear Came Home

## Part 1

Tatewaki-kun says that October is his favourite month, saying it's simply because there's lots of good food. But I'm not a fan, personally. It's halfway between seasons. It's late this year, but Asahikawa usually sees its first snow in October. The fall colours are beautiful, but the mornings are cold and the afternoons are warm, so it's hard to prepare for the weather. September still smells like summer, but October already starts to smell like winter. I hate how the weather fluctuates between extremes with no warning. October is also the  horrible month when I get a year older. It's also the month when my grandma died.

"Since when did Halloween become so… 'Normal?'" Imai-kun mumbles, looking around at the busy street.

The shopping park is full of the scent of food, and the sound of people laughing. There's a Halloween event being held here today. It started on Sunday, so today is actually the third day of the event. Halloween isn't until tomorrow, but nobody seems to care about that. Halloween festivities originated in a foreign country, but it doesn't feel strange to see the decorations everywhere.

Seeing the huge shadow of the closed down department store always gives me a strong feeling of unease.

"Honestly… I feel like giving out candles is good enough," Imai-kun mumbles.

Giving out candles is a custom in Hokkaido that we used to do when we were kids. On Tanabata, especially on August 7th, people go around to different houses to receive candles and sweets. It's similar to Halloween.

"A lot of places don't let you do it anymore. They say it attracts crime or something, right?" Ranka says with a shrug.

"Yeah… Come to think of it, you don't see kids walking around in yukata during Tanabata anymore, either."

During Tanabata, there's always sales on big boxes of 10 yen snacks. Now that I think about it, my family hasn't bought any the

past few years.

“I don’t think they celebrate it much in the US these days, either. I’ve heard about people getting sick or hurt from insecticides and razors in the candy.”

“Really…?”

If I were a mother, I’d be worried about my kids going up to strangers’ houses. Maybe up to two houses away, but I don’t know anything at all about the people who live 10 or more houses away from me.

“It only makes sense that people would start enjoying it more privately. That’s why Halloween is more of a holiday for adults to dress up than it is for kids.”

Kids who used to enjoy dressing up and begging for candy from strangers are now adults who just enjoy wearing costumes. Despite the date being different, the custom of giving out candles must have made people from Hokkaido feel closer to Halloween.

I watch the hustle and bustle of Halloween in the streets. Watching the crowds of people walking around and moving about feels familiar- No wait, that’s not right. I’m probably thinking of Missus Oliver from the start of Christie’s “Halloween Party.” There’s a scene where Poirot’s friend, Mrs. Oliver, a mystery writer, is left out, unable to participate in the party preparations. I feel the same way now as she did in that scene. I feel like I’m somewhere else, even though I’m surrounded by other people. But unlike her, I can tell the difference between cucurbia pepo and cucurbia maxima.

“Yuriko?”

“Oh… Sorry.”

“It’s no problem, just be careful.”

I didn’t even realise  I had stopped waking. Ranka pulls me along by my hand with a puzzled expression. I’ll be in the way if I just stand still in this crowd.

“There’s more people wearing costumes than I expected…”

Ranka laughs at my panicked excuse. “Right? That’s why I said I’d do your makeup, Yuriko.” She’s wearing scarier makeup than usual today.

“It always feels like Halloween when you’re there.” That comment earns Imai-kun an elbow to the side from Ranka.

They get along like fire and oil, they fight every time they talk to each other. Usually Tatewaki-kun and I try to pacify them, but he isn’t here today.

“…Speaking of, where’s Tatewaki?” Ranka says, as if she just realised. I guess we were thinking the same thing.

“Oh, well… He already had plans with Kujou-san.”

“Kujou-san agaaain?” Ranka says, sounding bored.

“It’s like ‘Sakurako-san’ is his favourite phrase. Isn’t it lonely being best friends with someone like that?” Ranka sulks.

“Not really… I have club activities, too,” Imai-kun shakes his head.

“But we’ll be studying for exams next year, and it’ll be harder to meet up once we graduate high school. Tatewaki is aiming for med school, right? Zakiiso was grumbling about how he’ll be in trouble if he doesn’t study hard. This might be the last chance we have to hang out with all four of us,” Ranka sighs.

I don’t particularly like having Tatewaki-kun around, but like she said before, it feels more comfortable to have all four of us together, like the group is balanced. I feel the same way.

“Well… I don’t mind, as long as Shoutarou is having fun. Besides, I know you’ll still invite us to hang out next year.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Ranka says boldly.

“It *is* important to take breaks… Okay, make sure to invite me next year. I’m sure all four of us will go!”

“Yeah… I will,” Ranka nods with a smile.

I can’t even imagine what next year will bring. I know that Sakurako-san is always Tatewaki-kun’s top priority, but… For some reason, I feel like that’s not the only reason he isn’t here today. Ever since ‘that day,’ he’s been avoiding me.

When the other two are around, we still act the same as always, and we still talk to each other like normal… But when it’s just the two of us, the air in the room feels colder. It’s no mystery why. I said terrible things to him, and above all else, I know about the feelings that he doesn’t want anyone else to know.

About half of the violent words I threw at him were truthful. I do hold negative feelings toward Tatewaki-kun , but I greatly exaggerated things. Of course, I chose to say those words to protect Ii-chan. Besides, I wasn't my usual self. I don't usually think *that* poorly of him. I'm positive it was jealousy that made the words come out so smoothly. Or anger, or defeat. The emotions that smoldered within me as I read Tatewaki-kun's suicide note were hotter than fire, yet colder than ice.

I like Sakurako-san, too, so I've always been jealous of him. However, when I saw his feelings toward Sakurako-san laid out so clearly before me, my complicated, nameless emotions became intertwined. It violently shook me to my core. But maybe it's for the best. The poison that The Swallow slowly poured into my ears still lingers inside of me. Yet that poisons didn't overtake me is because my feelings toward the two of them are stronger than it.

I still love Sakurako-san, even now. I grow fonder of her every time I learn something new about her. Her dignified air, her slightly husky voice. I want to be a strong person like her, who won't be swept away by those around me. I'm so terrified of being hated. I want to change and become someone who doesn't worry about how other people look at me.

I like Tatewaki-kun, as well. I like seeing him by Sakurako-san's side the most. Yet at the same time, I envy the strength the two of them have. I envy their bond. No matter how much I try, I can't get between the two of them. She'll never call me "girl," and I'll never be the person he was fated to meet. The anger and jealousy I felt back then has left no scar behind on me. All I'm left with now is apathy. Feelings of helplessness… of emptiness. Nothing seems to shine anymore.

"You don't need to be so wary of me, I won't tell anyone about your suicide note." That one sentence is all I have to say, yet I can't.

I'm not your enemy anymore. You don't have to worry. You don't have to suffer. I hate myself for not being able to put his mind at ease.

"…Yuriko?"

"Sorry, it's nothing."

Ranka leans in front of me with a worried look on her face. I must have been lost in thought again.

“Sorry, I actually didn’t get enough sleep last night. I started watching cute animal videos online, then it was morning before I knew it.”

“Oh, yeah, once you start watching those it’s impossible to stop.” Ranka puts her arm around my shoulder. She must have believed my excuse. “But even if you’re tired, you still have to have fun. It’s Halloween, after all.”

“Even though it’s a holiday about ghosts?”

“Yeah, you’re supposed to have fun while being scared by zombies and monsters,” Ranka says with a grin.

“How are you supposed to have fun and be scared at the same time?” Imai-kun asks. I think he has a bit of a negative view on Halloween.

“You just do. Halloween is a two sided kind of holiday. Stillness and motion, life and death. Opposites exist simultaneously during Halloween. It’s like new year’s, obon , and a harvest festival all at the same time,” Ranka continues.

It was the day the year changed over for the ancient Celts. It was a day to harvest crops, and prepare for the next  year’s harvest.

“At some point it got mixed up with Europe’s All Saints Day, so the day it's on has gotten switched.  It’s a strange holiday that’s changed over the years.”

Imai-kun and I listen to Ranka’s quick explanation. Ranka loves all kinds of myths, legends, and mysterious or fantastic stories, so she’s knowledgeable about them.

“Samhain is the day the season changes. The borders between worlds grow ambiguous, causing the door to the other world to open. There’s legends about heroes achieving great feats on Samhain, as well as ones about people being kidnapped by fairies, or getting lost in the fairies’ world.”

All across Europe, it’s been a day where the dead come back to wander the streets, with similar legends and customs.

“In Brittany it was said that it’s dangerous to sail at this time of year, since your ship would be hijacked by people who died at sea, so

don’t get lost, you two. You might find yourself in a different world before you know it,” Ranka looks like a witch as she laughs with her lips coloured blue.

She has an unhealthy look today, with blackish blue around her eyes. She looks like she could really be dead. In reality, she’s the one in the group that cares the most about nutrition and calories.

“Well, it’s more of a day about eating delicious fall fruits and playing games, isn’t it? Then you watch out for ghosts and fairies at night.”

“Games… like the one where you bite apples?”

“Bobbing for apples. Additionally, there’s many other common types of fortune telling about your future or love life, such as roasting raisins and nuts, picking cabbages, or throwing apple peels.”

Some girls get excited about catching a glimpse of the person they’ll marry in the future on Halloween night. Creepy costumes, feasts of sweets, and special permission to get into mischief. It feels like no matter what you do, it’ll be forgiven on this unusual, patchwork holiday. Asahikawa doesn’t usually go all in on it, but there’s still performers on stage, sweets contests, etc. …There’s a variety of events going on today, such as workshops, markets, and street performers juggling to get everybody excited.

Ranka loves Halloween, while Imai-kun isn’t a fan. I don’t hate it, but I don’t love it, either. What would Tatewaki-kun say if he were here?

While walking along and worrying about that, I see a girl carrying a pastel blue backpack. She looks to be around Ii-chan’s age. She’s holding her mom’s hand with an innocent smile. I can’t help but smile when I notice a cute, grey teddy bear peeking out from her bag. When I was little, I used to always carry a stuffy or doll with me.

“Hurry up, Yuriko!” Ranka pulls on my arm.

“Oops, sorry.”

The feeling of Ranka’s hand against mine brings me back to my senses. I can’t cause these two any trouble. Maybe the Halloween spirit is leading my astray. I have to stay focused.

Part 2

“It sure is crowded.”

Ranka leads me to the venue where the sweets festival is being held.

“Isn’t it because of some kind of event? Chef Mozu is going to be there, right?”

‘The decisive battle to determine Asahikawa’s best Halloween treats! The sweets shops will be voted on, then the top 5 will battle it out for victory!’ The poster lists the judges as being a popular entertainer, a reporter, and Chef Mozu. Chef Mozu is a famous French chef from Hokkaido.

“Haah… There’s nothing more annoying than this for people who just want to enjoy Halloween normally,” Ranka says, disheartened.

We already had lunch, we were going to get something sweet… But this crowd is making it difficult. We have to fight through the crowds to pick out what we wanted, but we each eventually make our purchases. I almost got lost a few times, but luckily Imai-kun is tall enough to make a good landmark. He tries to protect me a bit from the crowd, probably because he’s concerned about my ‘lack of sleep’.

“Let’s go eat over there instead,” Imai-kun wearily points to a different plaza.

The eating space in front of the temporary stage is completely full already. Fortunately, there are lots of other places selling food around, so there’s lots of places to sit and eat. However, since it’s just past 1pm, all the seats are full.

Ranka notices a parent and child get up from their seats, and quickly slides in. The seats are in a simple tent, right next to a meat stall selling pork skewers.  I’m glad to have a seat, but it feels like we’re kicking these people out. The mother is hurriedly trying to clean up and leave the table. I notice it’s the same parent and child with the teddy bear from before.

“I got a chair!”

We have to drag an unused chair over from a different table, but we have just enough space for the three of us to sit around the

cramped table… The sweets and meat cooking nearby smell great, but both of the scents together are a bit overwhelming.

“I should have bought something to drink.” Just as I’m about to sit down, I notice my throat is dry.

“You go, Imai. We’ll save your seat.”

“What?!”

Ranka commands him while leaning back in her metal folding chair. Naturally, Imai-kun scowls at her. Since he’s so kind, Imai-kun stands up, resigning himself to his task.

“Oh, I’ll go with you, then.” I can’t delegate everything to him, so I follow along behind.

The sweets contest is starting, so I can hear a roar of cheers coming from the venue as Chef Mozu goes out on stage. I can hear the distant sound of someone talking through a microphone, but I can’t tell what they’re saying. It must be Chef Mozu talking, though, since every time they say something, shrieks rise from the crowd.

“Did you want to go check it out?” Imai-kun asks me after he sees me looking toward the venue on our way back from the vending machine.

“No, it’s fine. Let’s just hurry up and go eat our cakes.”

It’s not that I’m totally uninterested. I’m not a fan of Chef Mozu, but I am interested in how culinary experts would evaluate the sweets from around here. Ranka absolutely hates handsome types like Chef Mozu, though.

“Okay,” Imai-kun says before we sink into silence.

I have no choice but to bring up something else to talk about. When I’m with Tatewaki-kun , I don’t mind not talking. Imai-kun is taciturn, though, so I always feel exhausted from trying to make sure he’s not uncomfortable. Imai-kun is kind, but when Tatewaki-kun and Ranka aren’t here, it feels like I don’t know what to do or say. Due to that, I walk a bit faster than normal on the way back. Ranka is probably getting bored of being alone by now, too.

I try to catch my breath as I take my seat. Just as I’m opening up my bottle of milk tea, something hits my foot.

“?”

It feels strangely heavy, so I look under the table.

“What’s up?” Ranka asks. There’s something next to her black, enamel shoes. “What is this?” Ranka looks down at her feet, and picks up the object. “It’s a bear stuffy! But what’s it doing here?”

“The girl from earlier probably dropped it.” I look at the teddy bear. You don’t see many blueish-grey teddy bears, and the stitching on its nose looks familiar.

“From earlier?” Ranka tilts the bear. It makes a “ beeeh ” sound. “It sounds like a cow!”

Every time she tilts the teddy bear, it makes the same “ beeh beeh ” noise. It really sounds just like a baby cow.

“It must have a growler inside. My older sister used to have a cow stuffy  like that,” Imai-kun says.

“Hey, isn’t this thing kinda expensive? Look at the tag.” Ranka folds over the bear’s ear to look at the worn out tag.

It’s too tattered to read anymore. All I can make out is the letter S.

“Poor thing… I’m going to take it to the lost and found.”

When I think about how that little girl is probably crying right now, I feel like we have to get it back to her as soon as possible.

“They were here just a minute ago, right? Maybe they’ll come back for it. If we take it now, we might just pass them by,” Ranka says.

“Hmm… Yeah, you have a point.” It makes sense that they would retrace their steps once they noticed it was missing.

“First of all, let’s eat. We can think about what to do afterwards.” Ranka sets the teddy bear on top of the table, and opens up the box her cake came in to show it to the bear.

Ranka got a roll cake from an Alice in wonderland-themed cafe called Mad Tea Party. Imai-kun got dorayaki with pumpkin cream and adzuki beans, and I got a pumpkin chiffon cake.

“Mm!”

All three of us are surprised at how delicious the first bite is. It’s different from the soft chiffon cake that I get at the tea shop I usually go to. The sticky, moist pumpkin paste is intertwined with the airy, springy body of the cake. It’s exquisite. It’s not very sweet, but it goes well with the pumpkin cream that’s decorating it.

“The pâté sucré that I was going to get was out of stock, but this is amazing!” Ranka has a satisfied smile as she eats her roll cake that’s decorated with a bat.

Imai-kun happily bites into his dorayaki with a jack o lantern branded on the top.

“I love pumpkin,” I say, accidentally revealing my affection for the squash.

“Same,” Ranka says, nodding. “Yuriko, you used to have pumpkin and adzuki beans simmered together in your bentou , didn’t you?

“Yeah. My grandma liked it, so she made it a lot. I’ve tried making it from memory before, but it never tastes the same…”

It’s the same with her pumpkin dango. I watched her do it so many times. I did everything the same, mixed the starch and sugar the same way, but it never tastes right.

“Pumpkins have gotten way yummier recently due to selective breeding, right? Couldn’t it be that? It might make it so it doesn’t taste the same. My grandpa used to love to eat tomatoes with sugar, but now he always complains about how tomatoes are too sweet these days.”

“He should stop putting sugar on them, then…” Ranka says, sounding exhausted.

“Yeah. I think my grandma was good at preparing different kinds of pumpkins differently to make them taste better, too.”

“The pumpkin you usually have in your lunch tastes plenty delicious to me.”

“I guess so.” Imai-kun nods along with Ranka’s words.

“But… It’s just not the same, nostalgic taste, you know? I want it to be like how Tatewaki-kun loves Chick Pudding…” As I’m speaking, I suddenly realize .

“Hm? What do you mean? Tatewaki likes it because it tastes good and the jar is cute, right?”

“Yeah… That’s right.” Panicked, I evade  the topic. Tatewaki-kun told me not to tell anyone the story about his memories with his grandma and the pudding when he confided in me. He also told gran and Sakurako-san about it, though.

“Well, you’d have a harder time finding food that Tatewaki-kun doesn’t like.” Looking down at her last bite of cake, Ranka has a bit of an evil grin. “…I wonder if there is anything he doesn’t like.”

Imai-kun furrows his brow with a worried look, and tilts his head. “Like bugs, or something?”

“No, I feel like even if he took a bite of a bug and realised it tasted good, he wouldn’t think twice about eating the rest.”

“Yeah, he’d eat them. Then he’d say ‘you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover’ with a smug look on his face.”

“Hmm… You’re right.”

I thought there’d be no way, but since it’s Tatewaki-kun we’re talking about… I’m sure he could eat a grasshopper or bee larvae without batting an eye… Even though she was the one that brought it up, Ranka looks somewhat uncomfortable. Since Imai-kun and I have already finished eating, we can’t help but feel a little mischievous.

“I heard on TV before that spiders taste like chocolate.”

“Bleh, cut it out!”

She already has  her last bite in her mouth, and it had a spider shaped chocolate on it. Her face turns bright red.

“Ahahaha!”

Ranka throws a wet paper towel at Imai and I for laughing at her. Then, a bag is placed on the table in front of us.

“If you’re done eating, then hurry up!” A mother with three kids glares at us. None of them are the same kid with the teddy bear.

“What? You’re not even going to let us finish our drinks? Just because we finished eating doesn’t mean we have to leave right away.”

“No way! Don’t be one of those annoying people who sits and chats all day!”

The mother puts her tray on the table and forces me out of my chair.  The children are too impatient to wait, so they start picking up frankfurters and zangi with their hands before they even sit down.

I get that the mom wanted to find a spot to sit as soon as possible, but she could have been nicer about it… Since we’re finished eating, we reluctantly leave the eating area.

“What’s wrong with that lady?! How dare she call us annoying?!”

“Hey, Ranka…”

I try to calm Ranka down, but apparently the oldest of the kids, a girl who couldn’t be older than 7 or 8, touched the hem of Ranka’s gothic dress with ketchup-covered hands. Fortunately, the dress is black, and she wiped it off with a wet wipe right away, so it’s not too noticeable. It still smells like ketchup, though. Ranka is so angry that she wants to go back and complain, but she also doesn’t want to even see that family again. Imai-kun is in a bad mood, too. He’s even quieter than usual. There are lots of people here, so of course there would be some rude moms hanging around, but there’s also kind families with teddy bears…

“Oh right, the teddy bear!”

“Huh? Aw, no, I don’t want to go back there!”

I feel bad for the stuffy  and the family… But Ranka firmly refuses to go back for it. I don’t want to go back either, but…

“Then… I’ll go alone.”

I can’t stand the thought of leaving the teddy bear with that rude family, Before I can go, Imai-kun stands in my way.

“Don’t cause any trouble.”

At least he isn’t saying I can’t go.

“I’m sure the people who dropped it are gonna go back for it soon. More importantly, let’s go to the workshop! We can make a lantern!” Ranka says, pulling on my sleeve.

“Yeah… I guess so…”

Outwardly, I smile back at Ranka, but deep down, the other side of me is sneering. Am I really going to abandon that girl’s teddy bear? Am I just going to let myself get swept away again?

“…I can’t help it,” I mutter to myself as we walk toward the workshop’s booth.

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“No, it’s nothing,” I reply to Ranka, who’s looking over her shoulder at me.

Really, there’s nothing I can do about it. Besides, it’s not my fault. I didn’t do anything wrong.

Part 3

It leaves a bad taste in my mouth, but I choose to forget about the teddy bear. It's the mother and daughter's problem.As we walk to the workshop booth, I keep telling myself that it'll be fine, they'll go back for it. Unfortunately, the lantern making booth is popular so all the seats are filled. We decide to go look at the other booths in the meantime.

"Felt a Halloween monster out of wool!" "Face paint challenge!" "Ghost candle making experience!" "Monster snow globes!" …There's all kinds of interesting signs lined up by the other tents.

"The other ones seem like a lot of work, and they're expensive… the candles and snow globes are 666 yen + extras…"

Ranka sounds annoyed as she explains to us that even if the base fee is only 666 yen, anything like coloured sand or decorations cost extra, so it'll end up costing 1000-2000 yen by the end. Face paint can also be expensive, depending on the design you want.

"What should we do? Want to wait for some seats to open up at the lantern one?"

The wool felting sounds time consuming and troublesome… I'd rather just make a lantern for the flat rate of 666 yen… As we're talking, my phone goes off.

It's my mom's ringtone. Ever since we had that big fight, she's been making an effort to talk to me more. She still scolded me for running away, of course. She doesn't bring it up, but she has been starting conversations with me more than she ever has in the past. Sometimes it makes me happy, but sometimes it's really annoying. I don't hate seeing her smile when she says my name, though. I already told her where I was going today.

"Can you buy me a cake while you're there?"

"Sure, what kind?" My dad always chooses to get a Mont Blanc, but my mom always picks something different.

"Anything is fine, just pick whatever looks good."

"Really? That just makes it harder."

Nothing makes a decision harder than hearing "anything is fine." It's especially annoying when someone says that when you ask what they want for dinner.

“At least narrow it down. Do you want a tart, or something with cheese, or-“ While I’m talking on the phone, a woman quickly walks past me.

“Huh?”

She’s wearing a black, flower patterned dress. Her long, black hair flutters behind her, almost like she’s moving in slow motion. She distinctly stands out to me. I couldn’t see her face very well, but it looked like she had a grim expression. What stands out to me most is the teddy bear she was hugging to her chest.

“…”

I’d recognize that teddy bear anywhere from the slightly worn out, grey fur and the white tag. I start to chase after her, but she has already disappeared in the crowd. That woman wasn’t the scary mom from the table, or the mom of the girl who had the bear before. I’d never seen her before.

“-Hey, are you listening to me?”

My mom’s voice brings me back to my senses.

“Ah, yeah, sorry…”

I quickly end the call with my mom and head back to where Ranka and Imai-kun are waiting for me. I ask them about the woman who passed by. Unfortunately, they don’t recall seeing her.

“But… She seemed to stand out from the crowd… She drew my attention right away.” She had a strange atmosphere around her, like she came from another world.

“Haha, maybe you saw a ghost?”

“Hm?”

“I’m sure the woman you saw came from the other side because it’s Halloween,” Ranka says in an exaggerated creepy voice.

“There’s no way…” A chill runs down my spine.

“Quit it, there’s no such thing as ghosts,” Imai-kun says in a desperate attempt to comfort me.

“That’s… Right…”

“More importantly, Kougami… Your phone…” Imai-kun starts to speak, but hesitates.

“What about it?” Is there something wrong with it? He points at my phone in my hand, so I look down at it.

“Your strap.”

“Ah.”

The straps I had attached to a snap hook on my phone are missing. It had a konpeito keychain that I bought on a field trip to Kyoto.

“The snake head, too… But Sakurako-san bought that for me…” It was the skull of an oriental odd-tooth snake, which are rare in Hokkaido.

*‘Just like dogs, snakes can accumulate a foul smelling liquid in their anal glands. In oriental odd-tooth snakes, it smells just like that of a dog. Since this was a particularly small individual, I accidentally cut the anal glands… Despite the mishap, it turned out to be a beautiful and rare specimen.’*

After I ran away from home, Sakurako-san gave me the skull from that snake preserved in resin. When it was alive, it was a beautiful black and white snake. White snakes are said to ward off evil spirits, and snakes also represent growth because of how they’re always shedding their skin. I like to think that Sakurako-san gave it to me to tell me to keep growing and changing.

“Aww, but it was so cool. What about your bag?” Ranka looks worried as she opens up my backpack.

The two of them search through, but unfortunately, my straps aren’t in there. They’re not in my pocket, either.

“Where did you last see them?”

“I’m not sure, but the last time I used my phone before that call just now was when I took a picture of my chiffon cake…” Unfortunately, I can’t remember if they were still attached back then or not, even though they’re pretty big and heavy.

“I think I would have noticed if they were missing… But I don’t remember seeing them, either…” Ranka says. Imai-kun nods.

“Still, I didn’t notice it until Imai-kun said something, so it’s possible I lost them even earlier…”

If that’s the case, I really have no idea where they could be.

“…Well, it can’t be helped. Let’s start by retracing our steps. Hopefully that witch and her brats are done eating already. I’m a little

worried about that bear, too," Ranka says with a sigh.

"But…" That mother and her children might still be eating.

"It's fine, it's important to you. If it comes down to it, we can always just sacrifice Imai."

"...Sure. Wait, what?!" Imai-kun says with wide eyes after realising what she said.

Ranka and I look at each other, then laugh softly. He's reliable, but I don't want to bother him. Nonetheless, I really don't want to lose those straps. It has memories from my school trip, and more importantly, a gift from Sakurako-san.

"The jack o lantern station is still crowded, so let's go look for it now!" Ranka says, gently patting me on the shoulder.

Times like these make me thankful for Ranka's ability to take action. It puts me at ease. I feel hot tears start to well up in my eyes.

The three of us return to the eating area we were at before hoping that family is gone. Unfortunately, they're still there.

"Ah don't know."

When I reluctantly ask the scary mother if she's seen my strap, she shakes her head while eating a corn dog with plenty of sugar sprinkled on top.

"It's a bit of an odd strap… There's snake bones on it…"

"I haven't seen anything disgusting like that. Oh, someone did come and take that bear, though."

Apparently my strap is somewhere else. At least the teddy bear made it safely back to that girl.

"I'm glad… Was the little girl happy?"

"Little girl? Huh? She looked like she was the same age as me."

"Not a woman that has a bob cut and was with her daughter?"

I can only vaguely remember what the girl's mother looked like. A short bob cut and blue jeans…

"No? It was a woman with long hair. She was alone."

"Huh…" A chill runs up my spine, giving me goosebumps.

"Was she wearing a black, flared dress with a flower pattern on it?"

“Yeah… I think she was. She said it was her’s. Is there a problem?”

“No…”

The mother is spilling sugar from her food all over the table. She’s starting to sound angry again, so we quickly leave. I can’t believe this… That girl’s precious teddy bear was stolen by someone else.

“Maybe she was retrieving it on the girl’s behalf?” Ranka says in an attempt to comfort me.

We walked a block away from that mother, and found a bench under the roadside trees to sit at.

“Yeah… Maybe.”

“More importantly, what about your keychains? Those are important, too.”

“Oh… Yeah.”

As she said, those keychains are very precious to me, but when I think of that girl and her teddy bear, I get a lump in my throat and feel guilty. If I’d gone back to get it right away, this wouldn’t have happened. I should have looked for the girl and returned it to her myself. Maybe losing my keychains is divine punishment. My grandma used to say “the good you do for others is good you do yourself.” Basically, if you do good things, then good things will happen to you, and if you do bad things, bad things will happen to you.

“Let’s go to the lost and found centre!” I must have looked upset. “Keep your chin up!” Ranka says, patting me on the back.

“Yeah… Let’s go.”

Sitting here won’t accomplish anything. It’s better to do whatever I can. Maybe the woman in the black dress brought the bear to the lost and found centre. With faint hopes, we head to the event’s executive committee’s tent.

## Part 4

The executive committee tent serves as both the lost child centre, and the lost and found booth. Hearing a small child crying, I start to wonder if the girl who owns the bear is crying, as well… We

ask about my keychains, and about the teddy bear. Unfortunately, they don't have either.

"Maybe they just haven't gotten here quite yet," the kind, young man helping me at the counter says. I guess I was showing my disappointment. "Whoever finds it will probably drop by at the end of the event… Lost items have a habit of popping up somewhere unexpected after a few days. It'll turn up, unless a mischievous ghost stole it. Don't give up," he says, sending me off.

I wonder if the woman wearing the dress really was a ghost, then… Not that that could ever happen, though.

"Oh!" Just then, someone even more surprising than a ghost enters the tent.

"Utsumi-san…?"

"Oh, hey, Yuriko-chan."

Hiroki Utsumi-san, the police officer with puffy hair that lives next to Tatewaki-kun , is holding a small boy in his arms.

"I'm bringing in a lost kid… Oh, Icchan is here, too. Just outside the tent."

"Huh?"

Even if he's not on duty, Utsumi-san is a police officer, so he can't just ignore someone in trouble. No matter how good of a person you are, helping others is difficult. It takes courage, so in my opinion, Utsumi-san is a praiseworthy person. It's amazing how he doesn't look the part at all. I secretly respect him, though.

Icchan - also known as Isozaki-sensei. I really don't want to see him. Nothing good ever happens when you meet with a teacher outside of school.

"Yurikooo!"

I sneak out of the tent, but Ranka is already talking to Isozaki-sensei, and is waving me over. Beside her, Isozaki-sensei is nonchalantly looking at me. I get the feeling like he always has that frown, like nothing happening has anything to do with him. Halloween suits Ranka, but sensei seems like he could be from the fae world. He looks human on the outside, but inside, he's a completely different being. Like Sakurako-san.

“Come on! Ask him, Yuriko! They should help look for your keychains! The more, the merrier, right?”

Apparently Ranka has ordered him to help with the search. It’s true that I could use all the help I can get, but…

“Absolutely not,” Isozaki-sensei replies firmly, exactly as I expected.

“Really? You’re refusing a request from your sweet little students?”

“I’ve never once in my life thought of any of my students as sweet.”

“Ahaha… I guess so, but you shouldn’t say that in front of us.” Ranka hits him in the solar plexus, but Isozaki-sensei just shrugs defiantly.

“But, well… It can’t be helped if you’re in the middle of a date,” Ranka says in a hushed voice while glancing at Utsumi-san, who is just coming back after dropping off the lost child.

“…Huh?”

“You’re not? You’re never interested in talking about romance, even though you’re so pretty, so… There’s rumours.”

Isozaki-sensei is pretty effeminate, so some of the girls at school think he might be gay. I’ve personally heard rumours that he isn’t interested in women, too.

“When hell freezes over,” he says with an extremely displeased look.

“There’s no need to hide it from us. Love comes in all forms,” Ranka says, giggling. Sensei’s expression stiffens  even more.

“I just figured he wasn’t interested in anyone but himself…”

I helplessly try to save Isozaki-sensei from Ranka.

“That’s even worse,” Ranka says with an exaggerated sigh. She takes a picture of Isozaki-sensei and Utsumi-san standing side by side, but I have no idea what she’s planning to do with it.

“Well, fine then. If you two don’t want me spreading baseless rumours, you’ll help us find the keychains.”

“What?!”

That’s cruel. Threatening a police officer… Ranka is scary.

“You hit me earlier, so I’ll file a report against you,” Isozaki-sensei says with a straight face.

“Nooo, the paperwork is a pain, and I didn’t bring my seal today,” Utsumi-san says before offering to help with the search.

Sensei crosses his arms and groans.

“Fine… I’ll cooperate with you for two hours.”

“Why two hours?”

“You’ll buy me ice cream from the gelato shop under the bookstore after. One scoop per hour. If I eat more than two scoops, I’ll get a stomach ache, so I can only help for two hours,” he says, giving a peace sign with a straight face.

“What?! You’re extorting your students?! Well… At least then we won’t owe you a favour.” Ranka nods in agreement. “Then it’s your treat,” she says to Imai-kun.

“Why me?!”

“No… I should pay, since it was my keychains that are missing…” It’s a big price to pay, but this was my own fault.

“If you’re done negotiating, let’s get started. There’s no point in searching all together, so let’s split into two groups. I’m incompatible with Ran, so she can go with Utsumi-kun,” Isozaki-sensei says, pushing Ranka toward Utsumi-san.

“Whaaat? Then Imai-kun is coming with us. I don’t wanna be stuck alone with an old man.”

I wanted Imai-kun to come with me so I wouldn’t be alone with sensei, but I’d also feel bad for Ranka because she doesn’t know Utsumi-san very well, so it would be less awkward for her to have Imai-kun around.  If only Tatewaki-kun were here… Just as I start to think that, I push the thought out of my head.

“Then I’m with sensei.”

I’m truly unhappy with this pairing. He knows too much about me and The Swallow. Besides, I never know what to say to him.

“…I’m getting deja vu.” I mutter while I watch Ranka and the others walk away. Sensei laughs.

“You really like looking for things, Yuriko.”

“Not really…”

Sensei must be thinking the same as me; when we found the diamond ring at Asahibashi. Except this time we're looking for objects, not people.

"It's true that oriental odd-tooth snakes are rare in Hokkaido, but I don't think Kujo-san is the type of person to take offence to something like this. She might not have another one, but I'm sure she could have bones from a different snake ready for you soon."

"…I'd rather find the teddy bear than the keychains."

"Teddy bear?"

I'm sure Sakurako-san wouldn't get angry at me. At worst, she'd forgive me if I sincerely apologised. Isozaki-sensei is giving me a puzzled look, now that I've mentioned what I wanted to find most. I tell him everything from the beginning, even though I don't particularly want to. I have to tell him how guilty I feel, otherwise he might refuse to help.

"Hmm… Was the teddy bear really stolen?"

"That's how it seemed to me. I got a weird feeling from it… That woman who took it didn't seem to have any connection to the mother and child I saw before. The woman looked ghastly, too."

To me, the woman in the black dress stood out from the crowd. Like a black hole that swallows everything around it, she drew my gaze to her and wouldn't let go.

"The teddy bear was a colour you don't see often, so I thought it might be expensive."

"A teddy bear with a growler in it from Company S…" Sensei searches it up on his phone. "If it's from Company S, I should be able to find something about it, right? The white tag means it's a limited edition product. A grey teddy bear with a growler… How big was it?"

"I don't think it was that big, since it fits in a backpack… You sure know a lot about this stuff, don't you, sensei?"

"My older sister likes to collect them."

So he has a sister… I always thought he seemed like the only child-type. It wouldn't seem out of character if sensei collected stuffed animals… I watch him as he searches around on his phone.

It's half past 2 now, so the sweets festival is over. The flow of people around the venue has changed. I wonder how the contest

turned out?

“Yuriko.” Sensei suddenly holds his phone right in front of my face.

“Oh, it’s this one!” The same teddy bear is staring back at me with its cute, round eyes.

“It looks like it was released 17 years ago… But it’s not considered vintage yet, is it? I don’t think it would be worth a particularly large amount.”

It looks like you can still buy them, too. Sensei says that the price is just slightly higher than normal for a teddy bear.

“I see…” If it were expensive, that could explain why it was stolen.

“Well, the parents can just buy a new one if they have to.”

I guess he’s saying that we don’t need to look for it. They must be a fairly well off family if they can buy their child a stuffy that costs tens of thousands of yen.

“There’s no point in buying a new one,” I mutter, looking down at the pavement. “…When I was little, I lost my favourite stuffed rabbit. I took it everywhere with me, so it got all dirty. My mom took the opportunity to buy me a new one, but… Even though it looked the same, it wasn’t the same to me.”

I loved Mimi-chan, the bunny. Her white fur had turned grey, and she was covered in stains from all sorts of things, but I couldn’t sleep at night without her.

“So…”

“It can’t be helped. Having something means that one day you’ll have to lose it,” he says, cutting into my reminiscing. “Spoiling someone isn’t always the right thing to do. It’s not just a matter of supplying water and fertiliser. Take tomatoes, for example. If you water them too much, they’re not as sweet.”

“But…”

“That’s just how it is. Especially with humans. Growing up means getting used to losing things that are important to you. See, you can even sleep by yourself now, without your stuffed animal.”

“…”

I regret not arguing back. It's true that after I lost Mimi-chan, I learned to sleep without a stuffed animal, and started having my mom read to me at night instead. After I learned to read properly, I started reading stories on my own before bed. I lost Mimi-chan, and grew up.

"…What important thing did you lose before you became an adult, then?"

"Couldn't say. But the important things aren't always something tangible, right?"

"…In other words, you just don't want to tell me."

"Exactly." Isozaki-sensei accidentally lets a stifled chuckle slip out. "Anyway, I think it's important for you to ignore things that you're not involved in, Yuriko."

I know he's telling me to give up on looking for the keychains and teddy bear, but I just can't. This stubborn feeling is giving me deja vu. I never found the owner of the ring at Asahibashi. That's why I'll definitely find that teddy bear today. I don't want this to end the same way. This isn't about doing the right thing, or making myself look good. It's about my stubbornness and pride. I can do this, even without Sakurako-san here.

Today's biggest event is the sweets competition. There's a good chance that anyone who was at the venue today went shopping at the sweets booths. I've decided to start by interviewing around there. Both the dorayaki shop and the Alice shop are a bust. It's been so busy and chaotic that it's hard for anyone to remember a particular customer based on description. Finally, I return to the place where I bought my chiffon cake earlier.

"It's a teddy bear this time?" The shopkeeper with a bob cut asks, laughing after I ask about a woman holding a teddy bear.

"This time?"

"Sorry, it must be because it's so crowded, but it feels like a lot of people are looking for things today."

The staff members are willing to talk to me since there aren't many customers right now.

"I don't think we've seen her, though. Maybe it was stolen by the ghost."

“…The ghost?” I just blink at the giggling shopkeeper with the bob cut.

“Oh, you don’t know? About five years ago, a girl committed suicide by jumping off a building by the shopping park. The teddy bear she was holding was torn apart by the impact. Now every year around the day she died, people see a girl covered in blood with a broken neck holding the head of the bear and says ‘where is my bear’s body…’ while wandering around.”

“Yeah, that’s right. That’s why they’re renovating the building and renaming it now. She appears around Halloween every year, so she’s turned into an urban legend called the Teddy Bear Ghost, right?” Another clerk chimes in after overhearing our conversation.

“I see…”

I feel like I heard something like that when I was investigating urban legends with Tatewaki-kun, but…

“You can’t be serious. Logically, someone must have taken it. Unfortunately, you probably won’t get it back if it’s somewhat expensive.”

I try asking about my keychains, but they don’t remember seeing them.

“Sorry for taking up your time… Oh, and the chiffon cake was really good.” I politely excuse myself.

“Next time, come visit when you’re not looking for something,” the shopkeeper says with a smile.

Maybe I will… Sakurako-san and Tatewaki-kun would probably like this place.

“I hope you find what you’re looking for!” She says as I turn to leave.

It’s just past 3, but the sky is already starting to turn to evening.

“The keychains are small, so it makes sense that nobody would notice them… But why hasn’t anyone else seen that woman?”

“Normally, an adult carrying around a stuffed animal would attract attention, but since today is Halloween, everyone must assume it’s just a costume. Or maybe everyone is just interested in sweets and nothing else.”

“In that case, maybe we should try the workshops and other stores.”

“They probably won’t remember, just like at the cake shop.” Sensei is just as negative as always.

As we start heading back to the station, Ranka notices us and starts waving.

“Yuri!” She hops over to me in a rush.

“Did you find them?”

“No, sorry.”

I was hoping that she was excited because she had good news, but I guess not.

“Hey, Ranka.” Rather than letting it get me down, I ask her about something I’ve been wondering about.

“An urban legend? But five years ago… I only came to Asahikawa a few times a year back then.” She pulls her tablet out of her bag and starts searching for information on the teddy bear ghost. “Oh, here it is. There’s a suicide listed on this website about stigmatized properties… Maybe… This one…?” She keeps mumbling strange things to herself. “Mm… The suicide wasn’t committed by jumping off a building, and it was 6 years ago, not 5. This incident was from October 30th, so I think it should be the right one.”

“…So it happened on this day, 6 years ago?”

“Yeah. She committed suicide by slitting her wrists in the washroom, though.”

It certainly happened around Halloween, but the story is different from the one I heard at the cake shop.

“But I think… If someone committed suicide by jumping off the building, it would have gotten more attention, right? If it were big and flashy like that, it would have been all over the news, and Ucchi would know about it, right?”

“Hmm. I don't remember hearing about it,” Utsumi-san nods when we ask him.

Imai-kun says he hasn’t heard of it, either. I also don’t know anything about it, so it must not have been very big news.

“Well, rumours like these get exaggerated over time. There’s a lot of cases where the rumours are nothing like the original story,”

Ranka says, closing her tablet case.

“Huh? So is it related? Was it really the work of a ghost?” Utsumi-san says, twisting his body in fear.

“It’s Halloween after all~ Anything is possible~” Ranka says while holding her hands out like a ghost.

A woman who died the day before Halloween has come back to life, and there’s a teddy bear that transcends time…

“...If it wasn’t a ghost, then what was it?” A chill runs down my spine. It's more than just fear. I have a vague feeling that this is all connected somehow.

“The building where the girl committed suicide is just across the street from the eating area where the girl left her stuffy. Maybe this is connected, after all.”

Part 5

I tell the others about how I want to find the teddy bear. Ranka says that I can leave the keychains up to her group. I feel irresponsible, leaving my own lost items for someone else to find, but I also feel like I have to search for the teddy bear myself. It feels like if I look for it, something will change. Before, I would have begged Sakurako-san to help me, but I want to do this myself.

If people grow by losing things, then I must have lost something very important on the day I kidnapped Ii-chan. I know I’ll never be fully forgiven for what I did, but I want to grow up at least a little bit faster. I want to be able to believe in myself.

Isozaki-sensei and I head to the building that Ranka looked into for us, but before that, we check the lost and found centre one more time.

“Ah.”

I can hear a little girl crying, so I figure she must be lost. I enter the tent, and notice that she’s hugging an empty backpack.

“So you haven’t seen a teddy bear…”

I rush to the girl and her mother, who is trying to comfort her. The mother is surprised, of course. I explain that I’ve been looking for the bear.

“It’s my fault for not taking it to the lost and found right away, so I still want to find it.”

The mother looks bewildered by my story. Of course she is. A girl she doesn’t know just came up to her and told her that she’s looking for her daughter’s stuffed animal.

“No, you don’t have to…” She tries to politely turn me down.

I must have come off as a little creepy. If Utsumi-san were here, I’m sure she would have been more willing to accept.

“Please let me help. When I was little, I lost my favourite bunny stuffy. I cried for 3 days straight after that.”

I don’t have Utsumi-san’s smile, so I have to honestly tell her why I want to do this. I don’t want her daughter to feel the way I did back then.

“...Thank you. I’m happy to have your help. That bear is my daughter’s best friend.”

The look of confusion gradually vanishes from her face. She nods and holds my hands. The mom tells me that she wants to help look, but it’s hard enough to walk around with all the people, even if she didn’t have a crying child.

“She got it from her grandmother as a birthday present last month. She has taken it everywhere with her ever since. I told her not to bring it to the festival because it would get lost, but she said that it would be lonely at home alone.”

The bear should have been secure in the backpack, but it was missing before either of them noticed. It probably fell out while she was putting the backpack back on.

“It’s my fault for forgetting it when we were leaving our table. I’m sorry.” I bow my head.

“It’s not your fault, it was too crowded,” the mom says.

“Anyway, I don’t think this is just a normal lost item. That woman in the black dress took it. I’ll definitely find her.”

“Thank you… But I have no idea who that woman could be. I wonder why she took it…” The mom sighs. She says that she’ll help look, too, and gives me her contact information.

I’m glad we met. I was sure that the owner of the teddy bear would go to the lost and found at some point, but I was worried that it

wouldn't get back to the right family. Feeling reinvigorated, I bow slightly to the mother, then continue with my search.

"You shouldn't have said you'd 'definitely' find it," Isozaki-sensei says with a sigh as soon as I return to him. He was listening from a distance.

"Because you think I definitely won't find it?"

"Anyway… You've only got me for one more hour."

"I'm going to keep looking. …If Tatewaki-kun were here, he wouldn't give up until we found it."

Tatewaki-kun has it made. I'm sure he would refuse to give up, then Sakurako-san and everybody would help him out. All the clever adults. Isozaki-sensei is so soft on Tatewaki-kun, even though he's always working against me.

"...Either way, you and Shoutarou are different, Yuriko."

I know that, he didn't have to say it. I pretend not to hear him.

"The two of you certainly have similarities in some aspects, but you're distinct individuals. The rose and the ranunculus may look similar, but roses are part of the rosaceae  family, while ranunculi are part of the buttercup family. Totally different."

"Wait, similar? Tatewaki-kun and I?" I stop and turn around. Isozaki-sensei nods.

"Something about the two of you just seems to resonate together."

"And he's the rose while I'm the knock off?"

At best, I'm a ranunculus. A fake rose. See? It's just like The Swallow said. Nobody pays attention to me. I just get in everyone's way. Tatewaki-kun has told me that Isozaki-sensei is an "awkward, yet sensitive and kind person," but I don't see it.

"It's true that the rose is widely beloved, but the ranunculus is not a knock off. If it were, it wouldn't have an elegant sounding nickname like 'persian buttercup,' and its meaning in the language of flowers wouldn't be 'attraction.' In the West they say it means 'I am dazzled by your charms.' Ranunculi have been renowned for their beauty all over the world. So don't go assuming that one is better than the other." Isozaki-sensei looks genuinely mad as he speaks, then pinches my face.

“Yuriko, you may not know this, but ranunculus petals feel like silk to the touch. You don’t have to imitate anyone. You are you.”

“...”

I want to find the teddy bear, though. For that little girl’s sake. These feelings aren’t because of mimicking Tatewaki-kun.

“...I’d still help you for the next hour, even if you didn’t make that face at me.” Sensei lets go of me and walks ahead of me.

I follow behind him, feeling relieved.

“How did the lady in the black dress know that the bear was lost, anyway? There was a family already sitting there. Why didn’t she think it belonged to them?” I say, trying to keep my voice calm. I quicken my pace to catch up to him.

It’s true that a rough-looking family doesn’t seem like they would have a teddy bear, but why would your first thought be that it’s lost?

“Maybe she really was a ghost.” Sensei gives me an indifferent response. He really isn’t interested in anything except flowers.

“Sensei, do you believe in ghosts?”

“Who knows? There’s no proof that they exist, but there’s also no proof that they don’t, so I can’t say either way. Some people say that if you pursue science for long enough, you’ll eventually find faith. I’ve also heard that some neuroscientists say that science and religion are processed by the same part of the brain.”

His biology-teacher-style answer is annoying. But why would a ghost show up in the middle of the day just to steal a teddy bear?

“If ghosts were real… My grandma would have definitely come to see me by now,” I say.

Sensei shrugs.

“Whatever. I’m going to check out that building and see if I can find any clues. There’s no point in speculating, we should talk about something productive.”

He’s right. Sakurako-san always goes to places that might have clues, and asks around for more information. The bones may be hidden, but they’re still in there, supporting everything. If we go to that building, we might find out who the ghost is.

Apparently when sensei said to “talk about something productive,” he meant something about ranunculi. I don’t understand

why he thinks that's "productive." Eventually, we arrive  at the building.

It's near the station, sitting along the main street. It's a fairly old department store, but ever since the name was changed a few years ago, it has been largely renovated. It's one of the many things changing around Asahikawa station. There's a small florist next to a busy drug store, so we decide to ask there first. I end up unintentionally looking for ranunculi, but they don't seem to have any.

"It's too cold at this time of year for them," sensei says, as if he can read my mind.

I pretend like I didn't hear him, and turn to face the clerk.

"Six years ago? Well… This is only my second year working here. I'm not sure if any of the old businesses are still here after the renovation."

"Then… Do you know who's been here the longest, by any chance?"

"Not just the businesses, but anyone in security, a janitor… Is there anyone who would have been here back then?" Isozaki-sensei adds onto what I said. The employee tilts her head as she thinks.

"Security… Oh, now that you mention it, I think one of the security guards worked here before the reno."

I guess I have sensei's addition to thank. I buy a baby pink rose that's in front of me to thank the employees for listening to us. Just one flower is 300 yen. Flowers are expensive. I thought it'd be a pain to carry it around, but when I hand it to Isozaki-sensei, he has the widest smile I've seen all day. He's a bit like Sakurako-san, that way. With sensei in a better mood, we ask where the security guard might be.

"Six years ago… I've been working here for about four years." The security guard came by after being asked by the florist. He answers my question with a sour expression. "Well… I've heard a little bit about that incident, but it's not pleasant. It's kind of taboo to talk about here. Plus, there's rumours about ghosts…" He shivers.

He has frizzy hair, a stern face, and a big body… It makes me nervous to talk to him. He has an intimidating appearance, which is fitting for someone working in security, but he looked a bit nervous

when he mentioned the ghost. He confesses that he's scared of patrolling the stores after closing time, but he says he can't tell us the specifics.

"Oh, but Ishizuka-san has been working here longer than I have. He should be working at the big shopping mall next to the station, so if you really wanted to, you could go there and talk to him."

We hurry to the mall as fast as we can, since I'm running out of time with Isozaki-sensei.

Once we arrive, I head to the bathroom. The bathroom on the first floor is packed, so I go to the second floor only to find it empty. Once I leave the bathroom, I notice a security guard checking the area around the garbage cans.

"Excuse me… I'd like to ask you something…"

"Yes?"

As he turns to face me, I notice his name tag says "Ishizuka." What a coincidence. Ishizuka-san looks like a kind person. He has fluffy, white hair, and a small moustache. He looks like he's around the same age as my grandpa. As soon as I ask him about the other building, his expression stiffens.

"Ah… So it's already been 6 years… It feels like it was just yesterday."

"According to what I read online, it was exactly 6 years ago as of today." He nods and quietly mumbles, "6 years…" to himself. "The rumours say that she jumped off the roof, but she actually cut her wrists in the bathroom. A customer noticed something was wrong when she saw blood seeping out from under the door. I rushed over as fast as I could, but… There was already a crowd surrounding the bright red tiles," he says in a low voice.

Even though it's just a coincidence, it's kind of scary to hear about this while standing in front of a bathroom.

"I was surprised… That what I saw online was so different from the urban legend."

"Well, the things you see online aren't always true. She didn't actually die in the bathroom."

"What?"

“I was the one who performed first aid until the ambulance arrived. She was barely conscious, but definitely alive. She lost a lot of blood, but she survived.” Ishizuka-san had to take extensive first aid training in order to be able to respond to any situation that arose. He stares at his palms as he remembers that day.

“Then… She could be…”

You can’t rely on the internet, or urban legends. So it’s possible she’s safe? I faint glimmer of hope shines in my chest.

“No. Unfortunately, she ended up passing away. She hid from the nurses, then hanged herself in her hospital room.”

“But… Then…” The more I hear, the further away the story gets from the urban legend. “In that case, there’s no reason for her ghost to be looking for a teddy bear at that building, then…”

“That’s right. There was a rumour about a female ghost haunting that building before, so I guess the two got mixed together. That hospital closed down and got demolished already, which only added to the rumours… Oh, but…” He says with a deep breath. Beads of sweat form on his forehead, as if just remembering everything is making him nervous. His face is somewhat red, as well.

“Um…”

Maybe he’s unwell? Just as I hesitantly call out to him, he wipes his forehead, and resumes the conversation.

“It wasn’t the girl who committed suicide, but her sister that was looking for a teddy bear.”

“...Her sister?”

“Yeah. Her parents died one after the other, so her much-older sister was acting as her foster parent.”

Ishizuka-san tells me about how the older sister couldn’t stand to see her only remaining relative so depressed. She must have been scared that her sister would follow after their parents.

“The girl died on her way home from the toy store in that building. The store also did doll repairs, and that day, the girl had gone to pick up a stuffed animal that she’d left with them. The toy was supposed to make a sound, but it’d stopped working. The stuffed animal wasn’t with her after she cut her wrists.”

She had all her other belongings she was supposed to when she attempted suicide. The only thing missing from the washroom where she cut her wrists was the teddy bear she should have just picked up.

“When she woke up at the hospital, she was agitated because the stuffed animal was missing, so it didn’t seem like she had left it somewhere. Her older sister wanted to find it, too, so she searched the building, but… There was no suicide note, so maybe she wanted to distract herself.”

Yet she never found the teddy bear. They checked the security footage, but she didn’t leave the building at any point after picking up the bear. It was never turned in at the nearby police box, either.

“That stuffy  was really important to those sisters… Apparently it was expensive, so I thought that it might have been stolen in the uproar. I remember that the older sister was extremely upset about it.” Ishizuka-san shakes his head with a regretful expression.

“It was quite a nuisance for the owner of the building, but I don’t think it was right for him to blame the girl who died. I felt sorry for the girl and her sister, so I wanted to find that stuffy, no matter what it took…” Ishizuka-san says that not being able to find it is one of his biggest regrets, then heads back to work.

He looks lonely as he walks away… I head back to where Sensei is waiting, at the bench by the elevator. I tell  him about what I heard from Ishizuka-san. He crosses his arms and thinks.

“The teddy bear that disappeared back then, and the one from today… Don’t you think they have to be related somehow?”

The more I think about it, the stranger it seems. The same day across different years, in the same place, two different people are looking for similar teddy bears. Halloween is supposed to be a special day where the boundary between reality and the miraculous are blurred. Supposedly, you can even predict who you’ll marry on Halloween. Of course, none of that is true. But here I am, suggesting that there’s some kind of link between these incidents.

“Perhaps there is, but time’s up.”

“You don’t care about the answer?!”

“Not really,” he says.

He really doesn't seem interested at all.

“...You’d do it for Tatewaki-kun .” I accidentally let my resentfulness spill out into my voice. I already know. He went to Sounkyo with Tatewaki-kun before.

“That wasn’t about Shoutarou. It’s just… Our interests just happened to align. I make a point of only ever doing things for myself.”

In a way, that’s something very typical of Isozaki-sensei to say. He only ever thinks of himself. Sometimes, I wish he’d think about literally anything else, at least a tiny bit. Like that crying little girl, for example.

“...Pansies!”

“What?”

“Your face looks just like the pansies I raised, Yuriko.”

Before I know it, I’m gnawing on my lower lip in frustration. Isozaki-sensei suddenly bursts out laughing. He shows me a picture he took. It’s a photo of purple pansies. The pattern in the centres look just like a person with their mouth in a ∧ shape. Looking at the grumpy pansies while he grins at me makes me lose my will to fight against him. Maybe I just wanted to play pretend as “Boy and Sakurako-san” with someone.

For better or worse, Isozaki-sensei is similar to Sakurako-san. In that case… Maybe Tatewaki-kun isn’t special. Maybe he’s just good at interacting with that type of person, which is why he gets along so well with Sakurako-san and Sensei.

“...If you like flowers that much, you should listen to my request. My name means ‘lily,’ after all,” I say, mimicking Tatewaki-kun. If he uses bones to motivate Sakurako-san, I’ll use flowers on Isozaki-sensei.

“It’s mean to put it like that,” Isozaki-sensei says with a bitter smile, just as I expected. “...In the language of flowers, purple pansies mean ‘sincerity’ and ‘thoughtfulness.’ Yuriko, you’re good at using your head, but I worry about you… You’re more stubborn than sincere.”

“You could at least say I’m strong willed, instead.” I find myself feeling annoyed, but Isozaki-sensei just shrugs his shoulders.

“When I look at you, I’m reminded more of a pure white sukashi lily. In the language of flowers, white lilies mean ‘majesty.’ Like a lily, you’re graceful, but strong,” Isozaki-sensei says with a deep sigh. He has a habit of just saying whatever he wants.

I sigh, too.

“...Well, to tell you the truth, just like Shoutarou, I have no idea what you’ve been up to lately. Isozaki-sensei looks at me with upturned eyes, as if he can see straight through me.

I hate it when he looks at me like that. It makes me want to run away.

“I can't contact The Swallow anymore. Honestly.”

Even if I wanted to, I have no way of contacting him. I get it already. He was… just using me.

“That’s fine then, but… I don’t want everyone questioning me if something happens to one of my students again. I don’t want that kind of responsibility. I don’t want to bear the weight of another person’s life. If something happens to one of my students again, I think I’ll quit being a teacher and leave everything behind.”

“Quitting… Seems pretty drastic…”

Isn’t it irresponsible to just quit and leave everything behind? I know it would be hard on him to be blamed if something happened to a student, but… Suddenly, I realize  what he just said.

“Again..”

Ah… I see. Something happened in the past. He was the homeroom teacher of students who disappeared.  Those three girls who were supposed to be as close as sisters… What kind of trouble did sensei go through after the incident?

“It’s my life. What’s wrong with taking care of myself? I work, eat, and breathe for myself every single day. Nobody goes out of their way to harm themself if there’s no need to. There’s no need for self sacrifice. I can live happily on my own, so I don’t need other people. If I were the last person on Earth, I’d be happy as long as I had at least one flower by my side. Then someday, I’d have a beautiful garden,” sensei says.

That must be how he truly feels. How can he be so strong? How does he have the courage to live the rest of his life alone? How, when I live every day fearing that someone will hate me, or I won't be needed?

"...I'm sorry. I get what you're saying, so I'll go alone."

I was stupid to try to rely on him. He's not Sakurako-san. I should be grateful that he even came this far with me. It's thanks to his advice that I got to talk to Ishizuka-san. I bow deeply, then get off the bench- or at least, I try to. Sensei is holding my wrist, so I can't get up.

"...However, I'm a very kind, good-natured person, so it doesn't sit right with me to see someone I interact with regularly suffer."

"Huh?"

"I'm saying that I have no choice but to help you for a while longer. In exchange, you'll help me with the flowerbeds behind the school tomorrow. I still haven't finished preparing them for winter."

"...Got it. If you want, I can help you next spring, too."

Sensei smiles. The pact is sealed. For a moment, I wish I had something as important to me as Sakurako-san's bones, or sensei's flowers. Something to fill the void inside of me.

Part 6

The variety of rose I bought is named after Anthony Vivaldi, a famous composer, which Isozaki-sensei has extensive knowledge about. I ignore his speech, and instead call the mother and child we're helping on my phone. I'm still curious about where they got that bear. The mother said that it was a birthday present, but it seemed older. The mother says it was displayed at her parents' house as a decoration for several years. She doesn't know how her mother - the daughter's grandma - got the teddy bear originally, though.

"Oh, but my daughter cried so much that she fell asleep, so I called my mom to pick her up. She should be here in less than 10 minutes. You can ask her directly, if you want," The mother invites us.

We decide to quickly head over to where she is. She says that they're waiting by the coffee stand by the mall we were at before, so we head back the way we came.

Just as promised, the grandma  arrives 5 minutes after we arrive at the coffee stand. When asked again where she got the teddy bear, the grandma hesitates, as if she's wondering "Why do I have to tell you?"

"Actually… The person who took the teddy bear may have been looking for the same one."

"Huh?"

"I know it'd have to be quite the coincidence, but it's possible that the person who took the teddy bear didn't know it belonged to your grandchild, and thought it was hers."

It sounds far-fetched, especially if the culprit isn't really a ghost.

"It's just… hard to admit." The grandma casts her gaze down hesitantly upon hearing my impolite questioning. It seems like she has something on her mind. "It's an embarrassing story, so I don't want to say too much, but… The truth is, a few years ago my niece got into some trouble… The kind where she needed quite a sum of money. I didn't think she'd ever return the money, though, so I refused at first, but…"

The grandma said she'd never loan any money, but the niece was very persistent, especially since she knew that the grandma had her husband's retirement money on hand.

"She came to the house and said she'd give me that stuffed animal as collateral. She claimed it was very old and expensive. In the end, she stole the money from me… I haven't heard from her since. She hasn't given me a single yen back," the grandma says.

"When did this happen?"

"Around 5 years ago. When I looked into the bear, I found that it was rather expensive for my niece to buy, but definitely not worth enough as collateral for that loan. Well… I should have expected that."

The niece's mother is responsible for repaying the debt, now.

"There was nothing wrong with the stuffed animal, and it was cute, so I made it some  clothes and displayed it in  my living room."

Her granddaughter liked the bear so much that she gave it to her as a present. The grandmother felt a bit bad about it, but figured it would give her some closure to not have the bear around anymore.

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with using dolls as decorations, but it was made to be played with… That’s why I gave it to my granddaughter.” The grandmother hesitates for a moment before she continues. “...But it’s been bothering me this whole time… Why did my niece buy that teddy bear in the first place?”

“...Hm?”

“She said she ‘received it,’ but… I can’t help but think she stole it or something.”

“Mom, how dare you give that thing to Hikari!” The mother yells. She’s holding her sleeping daughter in her arms.

“But that girl never came back for it, and Hikari loved it so much…”

I can’t believe she gave something that was probably stolen to her grandchild as a birthday present… The grandmother looks sad. Ah… She must feel guilty about it.

“Um… I’m sorry for making you tell me about this…” I start to say.

6 years ago today, a girl took her life in the building right next to where Hikari-chan lost her teddy bear. The teddy bear from that day went missing, and never turned up.

“...6 years ago, my niece worked in that building. She quit within 6 months, just before Christmas time… She might have been in the building that day.”

What a repulsive thought. Ishizuka-san was desperately trying to save that woman while she laid in a puddle of her own blood, then someone else came and stole the woman’s teddy bear. Then, she used the bear as collateral to get money from her family. If she was working in the building at that time, she would have had to have seen Ishizuka-san and the woman’s sister desperately looking for the bear.

“How could she… Do that…” The grandmother covers her mouth in shock. I want to confirm my theory, but there’s no way to contact the  niece.

“Today is the anniversary of her death. Maybe the older sister came by, noticed Hikari-chan’s lost stuffy , and took it back.”

It wasn’t a ghost. The past, present, and future aren’t connected. The only thing connecting today with that day 6 years ago

is the teddy bear.

“In that case… The teddy bear is back with its original owner… I’m glad. I’m happy that she could get it back.” The mother nods.

“But…” All of us adults understand, but will Hikari-chan accept it?

“I’m sure my daughter will be upset… But I can’t do anything to change what happened. It’s almost like it was meant to happen… Maybe I’ll tell her it was fate.”

The grandmother also says that she feels it was wrong of her to give the bear to her granddaughter.

“I’ll handle everything from here. Thank you for helping search for this long.”

The mother and grandmother say goodbye and leave. To thank me, they gave me hot chocolate. I head back to where Isozaki-sensei is waiting, just a little further away. He said he didn’t want to get involved, so he waited somewhere he could see me.

“Is everything okay?”

“Hm… I’m not sure. I don’t feel relieved.”

I sit down next to him and sip the hot chocolate. The warm steam tickles my nose.

“Really? I think you’re the only one who isn’t fully convinced.”

“Maybe, but…”

I feel sorry for Hikari-chan, but I also feel bad for the woman in the black dress, who is probably the woman who lost her sister. It’s just a coincidence that it was the same teddy bear. The bears from the past and present are different toys. No, is it really all a coincidence?

“So then… why?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why would she take the teddy bear, which is so important to her that she sent it off for repair, then go and attempt suicide immediately after? Couldn’t she have just had it sent to her house?”

“Either way–”

“I know. You’re going to say it has nothing to do with me, right, sensei?”

He finally reaches a point where he can't bear my questions any longer, and gets up from his seat.

"But when my grandma died, I wanted to know the reason. What happened? Who, or what, was at fault? What could I have done to save her?"

Over and over again, those thoughts churned in my mind. No, even still. Even knowing that she didn't commit suicide. I can't stop thinking about it. I'll never know how she truly felt.

"I think… That older sister feels the same way. Especially since there was no suicide note."

I know I'm going to keep thinking about Hikari-chan and those sisters, too. If things continue like this, my feelings will be trapped in the dark forever, like a halloween ghost. I found the teddy bear, but I feel like there's something else I have to find, too. As sensei said, the important things aren't always something tangible. Ishizuka-san said that the hospital where she died no longer exists. If I were the older sister, I wouldn't want to go to the empty lot. There's a much more likely option.

"So? Where are we going next?"

I've already decided. The place where it all started.

We head to the building where the urban legend claims the girl killed herself. I don't know what floor it was supposed to have happened on, so I ask  the security guard. He says to keep it a secret, since it's closed right now because people think it's haunted. When I reach the bathroom, I find that it's completely covered by a wall, so I can't even see inside. I don't see anyone who looks like they could be the older sister, but there is a small, white bouquet of flowers leaning against the wall.

"Maybe it's for the best… I don't think it would be healthy for her to see the place her sister tried to commit suicide."

"I still wanted to try checking it out, though."

That's why I asked Sakurako-san for guidance in that forest. I didn't want to come here because I wanted to get something out of it. It's simply because my heart was screaming that I had to do it.

"It's been a full 6 years."

“What?”

“It’s been 6 years since her sister died, meaning this is the 7th anniversary.”

“...Ah.”

Milestones are important to the bereaved family. We never stop thinking about them. Even though we’re sad that they aren’t here with us anymore, we have to come to terms with their death. 7 days, 49 days, 100 days… 1 year, 2 years, 6 years, 12 years… We take each day, one step at a time, until even the 49th year after their death.

“It’s an important year, so it must be hard to sit still.”

We visit the general store near the bathroom so we can ask if they know where the toy shop is.

“It closed down,” the clerk says. She mentions that it’s been turned into a rest area now.

“Yuriko!”

Unable to control my feelings of restlessness, I naturally start walking faster. Isozaki-sensei struggles to catch his breath. We visit the rest area. There’s a woman sitting at a pure white garden table, on a trendy, matching chair.

“Oh…”

Long, black hair, a black dress… And in her arms, a grey teddy bear. I feel the strength leave my legs. I knew it. Ghosts don’t exist.

Part 7

Summoning all my courage, I stand in front of the woman in the dress. She looks neither sad, nor happy. She’s staring at the sky while holding the teddy bear, so she doesn’t notice me right away.

“Um… Do you need something?” She asks with a strange look in her dark eyes.

“Actually… A little girl lost that.”

“This…?” She looks down at the teddy bear she’s hugging against her chest, surprised. “A model from 17 years ago, a grey bear with a noise maker inside… I’ve also… Been looking for it for a long time.”

“But… The current owner of that teddy bear is a little girl. She accidentally left it behind at the eating area nearby. She cried for so

long about losing her ‘best friend’ that she wore herself out and fell asleep.”

“...I see. That’s tough,” she replies as if it’s not her problem

“This bear was originally a memento from my mother. My sister and I cherished it, but 6 years ago… I carelessly knocked it off the shelf while cleaning… Because of me, it wouldn’t make noise anymore. I was horribly depressed over it,” the woman says, slowly tilting the teddy bear on its side. It makes the same, cow-like noise as before. “But then… My sister found a place that could repair it… After they called us to say it was fixed, my sister went to pick it up…”

“But you never got it back.” I finish her sentence for her. She looks at me in surprise.

“How do you know that?”

“I… Spoke with Ishizuka-san, the security guard.”

“Ah, Ishizuka-san… He’s a very kind person. He told me that he would definitely find the teddy bear, no matter what… But unfortunately, *that* happened.”

The teddy bear makes that noise again.

“But… Are you sure that teddy bear is the same one that belonged to you two? It could just be the same model, couldn’t it?”

Deep down, I know that what I’m saying is cruel, but I have to know for sure. Who does it really belong to?

“I’ve been searching for a very, very long time… There’s no mistaking it. Today, it finally came home. I’m sure that my sister is watching us now.”

“Do you have any definite proof?” I ask.

She lets a small laugh leak out.

“Um…?”

“No, it’s just as you said.”

“Huh?”

“Yes… As you said, it’s the same kind of teddy bear, but it’s not the same individual.” The woman sighs and gently places the teddy bear on the table. “When my mom was still alive, she accidentally placed the bear too close to the stove, so it ended up with a burned spot on its butt… This bear has a clean butt.” The woman points at the spot where the burn mark should be.

As she said, there's no sign of any damage.

"Couldn't the toy shop have fixed it when you had the growler repaired?" Isozaki-sensei speaks up with concern, despite staying quiet the whole time.

"No, we were very clear in telling them what part to fix. It might have just been a careless mistake, but it reminded us of our mom, so we definitely didn't want it fixed. We made sure the repair order stated to only fix the growler."

"But if they made a mistake…"

"It's fine, I made sure of it. We explained how important it was to us, and the repair person seemed to understand. I can't imagine they would make a mistake like that."

A single blemish or doodle can be an important memory, especially when it comes to toys. The toy shop must know that, and handle such things carefully.

"So it's true. As you said… This isn't my teddy bear." The older sister takes a deep, deep breath, then lets out a long, long sigh. She readies herself, then hands me the bear. "I did something horrible to that little girl, but I felt like my sister had come back to tell me something, so… I'd like to apologise, and also thank you. It's thanks to you that I got to feel like my sister was here, even if just for a short while. Thank you."

The woman stands up, brushes off her skirt, and walks away. I finally… Finally got Hikari-chan's teddy bear back. I actually found it. It won't end like it did as Asahibashi. But…

"Are you satisfied this time?"

"...No."

"Why? You can give that toy back to the little girl. What is there to be unhappy about?" Sensei looks up at the sky, clearly fed up with me.

"But… This actually is that woman's teddy bear, isn't it?"

"What are you talking about? She just gave it to you."

"I know, but there's something that doesn't sit right with me."

To be clear, I didn't particularly want to take the bear from the woman, or return it to Hikari-chan. I just wanted to get to the truth, the bones, of this case. Even if that means ripping off the skin and tearing

through the flesh. I know that it's selfish, but I don't care if I make someone cry. I just want to know the truth behind this teddy bear. I stop sensei just as he starts trying to speak so I can phone Hikari-chan's mom.

"Excuse me, I just wanted to ask you something… Why did Hikari-chan's grandmother make the bear clothes?"

"What?"

"She said earlier that she enjoyed making clothes for it. I want to know why she did that."

"Umm… It's because it's cute, isn't it? Want me to ask her for you?"

"Yes, please do, if possible. There's something I want to confirm. Were the clothes to hide a scorch mark on its bum, by any chance?"

After listening to my question, I hear the mom talking to the grandma a short distance away from the phone. Soon, the grandma takes the phone so we can talk directly.

"You're talking about the clothes I made for it? That's right… It was small, but there was a black mark on it. It looked like a burn, so I felt bad for the bear and made it a dress to hide the mark. I had it cleaned and repaired before giving it to my granddaughter, though."

I feel my heart tremble as I hear her reply. It was just as I thought. Suddenly, I find myself remembering my own grandma.

"It was pretty expensive, but they did a good job cleaning it up, right? I believe that if you get them repaired, a stuffed animal like this can stay with a child for their whole life, and they can grow up together. But why are you asking about that?"

"It's nothing, I just wanted to check something. Thank you very much."

I hang up the phone and start to run. I'm sure there's still time. I absolutely have to find her. Fortunately there's no one else on the escalators, so I run down it, two steps at a time. I ignore Isozaki-sensei yelling at me for doing something dangerous. I make it to the first floor without seeing any sign of the woman. Did she stop at another floor along the way? No, I have a strong feeling like she wouldn't have done that. But in that case, where did she go?

The building has two exits. There's a large entrance facing the shopping park, and a smaller entrance facing the road next to the parking lot. So which one? If I were her, where would I go? Which would I pick? Before my head can come to an answer, my legs start moving on their own. I run toward the entrance leading to the shopping park.

Not just because this entrance is bigger and brighter, but because an ambulance couldn't stop in the shopping park. If it were me, I'd want to avoid using the entrance that my family member was carried through. Just thinking about it makes my legs want to freeze up. Trusting my instincts, I leap through the door, out into the shopping park. Before my eyes, I see that fluttering dress. I get a strange feeling like the wind is trying to tell me something.

"Wait! Please! This really is your teddy bear!"

I don't care if people are staring. I don't care if I'm annoying them. I scream as loud as I can. As long as I can help that one person, that's all I care about. Hearing my voice, she stops and turns around.

"...How do you know?" The older sister blinks at me curiously as I push through the crowd.

"I asked the little girl's grandma. She says it had a burn mark."

"What?"

"The grandma said before that she had fun making clothes for it… But then I remembered that my grandma made clothes for my Mimi-chan after I got her dirty…"

When I was little, I wanted Mimi-chan to eat my dad's spaghetti with me, so I tried to put some in her mouth. My mom was keeping an eye on me, and as soon as she noticed what I was doing, she yelled, "hey!" It surprised me, so I dropped the spaghetti on Mimi-chan's stomach. It left an orange stain on her white belly that wouldn't wash off. My grandma made her some cute clothes to hide it.

"She wanted to have it cleaned up before she gave it to her granddaughter. I'm certain that this is your and your sister's teddy bear."

I hold the bear out to the woman so she can take it. The bear makes a soft "beeeh" noise like it's agreeing with me.

“No… I don’t know…”

“Hm?”

She doesn’t take the teddy bear from me.

“What do you not understand…? Why not take it? You’ve been looking for it for all these years, right?”

“Yes, but…” She says, shaking her head. “I… Didn’t hear anything.”

“But the growler works just fine…”

“That’s not it… I always thought that if I found this teddy bear, I’d understand why my sister died… But I haven’t learned anything. Why did she have to die? Why didn’t she tell me anything? She was a nice girl who was loved by everyone. When she left the house that morning… She didn’t act strange at all…”

Unable to bring herself to say anything else, she covers her mouth and cries.

The sun has set now, and the night wind is starting to blow. The wind is cold at the end of October. The trees are shaking, and the leaves are falling. I wish it would be more gentle. It would be nice if it were warmer.

“Um… I guess it doesn’t know.”

I reach out my hand to the woman. “Yuri” is a summery word. I hope I can protect her from the cold, at least a little bit.

“Maybe her death really was sudden. It could be that when she was on her way home from picking up the teddy bear, she saw someone or something she didn’t want to see. I don’t think there’s one single reason for it,” Isozaki-sensei says, finally catching up to us. “I’m sure it was the culmination of many tiny threads that only she could see, gathering up until they snatched her away.”

“She should have just told me that she was struggling, then! Did she trust me so little?! Subaru was the only family I had left!”

“If it were me, I wouldn’t have told you.”

“Why?!”

“I wouldn’t be able to tell anyone who truly loved and cared about me. If I did… I’d hurt them, too. How could she say she wanted to die when you’re still there with her?!”

There's things you can't tell people because you love them. Even if you want to ask for help, sometimes your feelings make it hard to say.

"I think it's also painful for people to not be able to reciprocate the kindness someone has shown them."

If someone who loved me more than anyone else chose to run away because their life was too unbearable, I wouldn't be able to tell them how to feel. If it were me, anyway. But… Maybe it's important to have that kind of courage. To hurt and get hurt. You can't move forward if you're always afraid. People can't survive off just love.

Even if we hate it, or fight with each other, we still have to find the courage to move on, Subaru-san.

"Also, this bear does have a message for you. Subaru-san was looking for it as soon as she woke up, right?"

"Yes… The doctor said that she was so frantic that they had to sedate her…"

"Wasn't she… Looking for it for your sake?"

"...For me?" The older sister wipes away a tear. Her tears fall onto my arms and the teddy bear that I'm holding.

"Yeah. If you had it, then you wouldn't be all alone. She wanted to at least leave the teddy bear behind for you, so you'd feel a little less lonely. Most things will disappear eventually, but… If you take proper care of this teddy bear, it'll last forever."

"…"

The older sister reaches for the teddy bear. Its  dark eyes stare back at her.

"I think this stuffy is a sign of her love for you, an apology, and also… A message she left, saying that she wants you to keep living."

She gently picks up the bear. I'm sure it's happy to finally be back where it belongs.

"But… I feel sorry for the little girl."

"Yeah, but… Her mom and grandma both said that you should have it, so don't worry about it."

She rubs her face against its fur, then hands it back to me.

"...No. I can't take it."

“Why?”

“I’ve heard what I needed to. Could I meet the little girl instead?”

Part 8

About 20 minutes later, we meet  up with the mother and daughter at a cafe.

“Buru-chan!” Hikari-chan happily runs over as soon as she sees the teddy bear.

“Buru?” I ask, tilting my head to the side.

“It’s because it’s the same colour as the russian blue cat in the neighbourhood,” the mom tells me.

“Gimme!” Hikari-chan says, holding her arms up in front of the older sister.

The grandma picks up Hikari-chan, as if to control her.

“Honestly… I don’t know how to apologise…”

“Please, don’t worry about it. In fact, thank you for taking such good care of it.”

The grandma bows her head deeply in apology. The older sister does the same.

“Ever since my sister disappeared… I’ve always been looking for this stuffy. Every single day for about a year, I hardly thought about anything else.”

“Right… I’m so sorry…”

“No, don’t be. When I think back to that time, it was painful… But if I’d had the bear with me, I would have just been reminded of my sister, and kept crying and crying… It probably would have made me feel worse. Maybe… I would have thought about dying, too.”

It’s just like Ishizuka-san said. He was worried that she would follow her younger sister.

“Searching for the teddy bear gave me the strength to keep living… I was so obsessed with it, rumours started spreading about a ghost,” the older sister says, laughing.

The origin of the ghost looking for a teddy bear wasn’t Subaru-san, it was her older sister. With that said, the older sister hands the teddy bear to the uneasy Hikari-chan.

“You know, your grandma took care of it for a long time, but… Buru-chan actually used to be my best friend. That bear was super duper important to me, my mom, and my little sister.”

Hikari-chan opens her big, teary eyes wide at the older sister, and stops reaching out her hands.

“What about now? Is your mom gone?”

“Yeah… Both of them… Have gone somewhere very far away, so I can’t see them for a long time.”

Upon hearing that, Hikari-chan’s eyes open even wider. She turns her back to the older sister, and clings to her grandma.

“It’s okay, then. You can have Buru-chan. Hikari’s mama, and papa, and gramma are here, so Hikari is okay.” Hikari-chan tightly presses her lips together, trying her best not to cry. And yet, her eyes fill with tears. Still, she clings to her grandma’s chest, rubbing her eyes and saying “I don’t need it,” while shaking her head.

“No! It’s okay, don’t cry… I actually came here today to say goodbye to Buru-chan. All I ask is that you take good care of it.”

“...Really?” Hikari-chan sniffles.

The older sister smiles at her, despite her own tears.

“Yes, really. Also, it’s okay to be careless sometimes… I’m sad to say goodbye, but I know that it will have  lots of fun playing with you. I may not be able to see my mom, but I’ll be a mom myself pretty soon,” the older sister says, patting her fluffy dress over her stomach. “I won’t be lonely anymore, so I want you to be Buru-chan’s best friend in my place.”

“...Yeah!” Hikari-chan smiles, even though she’s dripping with snot and tears. She hugs the teddy bear, making it sticky.

“Hikari!” her mom yells.

But the grandma and older sister are both laughing. It’s just a stuffy , it can be washed.

“But… Is it really okay? Your baby is going to need a teddy bear…” Hikari-chan’s mom offers the older sister a chair, then bombards her with questions such as “are you in any pain?” and “how far along are you?”

“...After I met my husband, I started looking toward the future, rather than living in the past. I came here today for the 6th

anniversary of my sister's death… To say goodbye to my memories of her."

She says that she has always felt guilty that she's the only one who can be happy.

"I spent so long wondering why she died… But now, all I want is her forgiveness. A lot of unexpected things happened today… But even our teddy bear is moving on to a loving new family. I truly believe… That my sister's soul has been reborn, and she's living happily," the older sister says.

Hikari-chan accidentally knocks over her cup of juice. Her mom quickly starts wiping up the juice on the table. The grandma managed to save Buru-chan just in time to avoid a baptism by orange juice.

"I think this teddy bear has fulfilled its purpose with me, so I want it to go to a new family where it can love and be loved by a kind child. Besides, I think that bear needs to go home and be washed.

"I agree!" The mother says enthusiastically. The older sister is giggling.

I look around to see Isozaki-sensei watching us from a distance as he lets out a bored yawn.

Final part

Before I know it, it's already almost 6pm. I completely forgot that Ranka and the others were looking for my keychain. I check my phone to find that I got a text just a few minutes ago from Ranka saying "Where are youuu." I hurriedly contact them, and am told that they're heading toward Asahikawa Station for the time being. We agree to meet at a fast food place nearby. As soon as we sit down, Isozaki-sensei flops onto the table with a sigh, looking exhausted.

"...In the end, I don't think sensei needed to come with me." Rather, I feel like he mostly just got in the way.

"That's not true. I was acting as emergency backup in case anything happened."

"Emergency backup?"

"Yeah. The people you met with and spoke to weren't necessarily going to be nice people," he says, resting his cheek against the nice, cold table. "Yuriko, your way of thinking is

completely different from mine. I figured that there was something you needed to understand for yourself today, so I took a step back and let you handle it. I think I deserve some praise."

"..."

Sensei lets out an exaggerated sigh.

"Spoiling someone isn't always the right thing to do."

Isozaki-sensei's words pass through my mind. Ah, I see… That's why he didn't say anything. In order to let me grow.

"So… Are you satisfied this time?"

When I groan "hmm," in response to his question, Isozaki-sensei lifts his head up, panicked. "Again?!"

"It's just… In the end, the older sister didn't get the teddy bear back. I'm worried she'll regret it later…"

"Do you know how noise makers work?"

"What?"

As I gently press my hand to my chest to ease the slight ache I'm feeling, Isozaki-sensei tosses another question at me.

"No… I don't. Isn't it… Just some kind of machine?"

"It's a simpler mechanism than that. It's analog, not digital. There's a weight inside a small tube inside the toy."

I see… I thought it would have had some kind of sensor in it, or something.

"When you tilt the stuffy, the weight inside moves, forcing the air out. That creates the cow-like sound."

"If you think about it… It's a weird noise for a bear to make."

"Seriously, it's more like a cow than a bear," Sensei laughs.

"In the same way… That girl let out all of her emotions, so I think she'll be okay now," he says as he pulls the hood of his sweater down over his eyes.

I guess he's going to sleep until everyone else arrives. Before he can drift off, Ranka and the others arrive.

"Huh? Didn't you find the teddy bear?"

"Yeah! But… A lot happened." I give a quick rundown of what went on.

“That’s great! Good job,” Ranka says, patting my head. “Here’s your reward,” she says, holding something in the palm of her hand.

“My keychain?! Really?!”

“That’s right! Wanna guess where we found it?” Ranka is so happy and excited that she’s practically bouncing in her seat. “First, we checked all the stores, then we looked around all the roadsides, but we still couldn’t find it… We figured that maybe you’d lost it a lot earlier, so we went to the general store, the cafe, then we ended up at your house.”

“Really?!” It couldn’t be…

“Right? But there it was, sitting by the spot where you keep your bike at home.”

Oh, man. Come to think of it, I was reading Ranka’s text while pushing my bike with my other hand…

“Oh no… I’m sorry. I’m so embarrassed…” That was truly pathetic of me.

“Geez! Pay more attention next time!”

Utsumi-san and Imai-kun both say that they’re glad they found it. They’re all such nice people.

“I’m just glad you didn’t lose it somewhere near the station, otherwise we might have never found it. As long as you’re happy, it was worth the effort.”

“Thank you all so much!” I hug Ranka around her neck, and she hugs me back. I’m so happy that I almost want to cry.

“Anyway! Let’s go make lanterns! Do you wanna come, Ucchi and Zakiiso?” Ranka leads us outside, even though we’re still hugging.

“Absolutely not,” sensei says. He makes an X with his arms.

It seems like he forgot about the gelato, so I decide  not to mention it.

“I’ve had enough of babysitting.”

“Yeah, it’s time for us to act like adults, Icchan.” Utsumi-san puts his arm around sensei’s shoulder.

Ranka immediately takes a picture of them on her phone.

“Wait, why did you take a picture?!”

“No reason… It’s just insurance for later,” Ranka answers nonchalantly.

“Whatever, it’s just one picture. Let’s go drinking, Icchan! And get yakiniku!”

“Seriously…? Let’s get Japanese food, then. I’m exhausted.”

“Huh? What are you talking about? Yakiniku is the best for when you’re tired! What about kalbi?! Or hanging tender?! Or horumon?!”

“Absolutely not. Sushi would be better. If we don’t get sushi, I’m going home.”

I can’t help but burst out laughing at their ridiculous argument as we’re leaving the shop. Isozaki-sensei always says that he’s fine alone, but he seems to have more fun when someone else is with him.

“Then let’s go!” I say, leading Ranka by the hand.

She looks a little surprised at first, but then smiles and nods.

Despite our earlier enthusiasm, the lantern making booth is already closed. It’s after 6:00 pm already. All the workshops have ended already, including the jack o lantern one.

While we stand disappointed in front of the closed down tent, I hear a woman call out behind us, “we’re the last ones. Want to give it a go?”

I turn around to see it’s an apple bobbing event that’s sponsored by a local fruit farm.

“I can’t do it because of my makeup, but you can use apple bobbing for love fortune telling. If it takes one scoop, your love will come true. Two scoops, and your love is still unrequited. Three or more tries, and your love is dead in the water. Go give it a try, Imai,” Ranka says, nudging Imai-kun with her elbow.

I didn’t know Imai-kun had a girl he liked, but in that case, I’ll happily give him my turn.

Apple bobbing is a game where you have to take floating apples out of a bin using only your mouth. Imai-kun bravely dunks his head into the plastic pool they’re using in place of a bin.

I remember in Agatha Christie’s “Halloween Party” they had the bin in the library. They said in the story that it was because the carpet

was old, but is it really okay to play with water near books? Seeing Imai-kun soaked with water up to his shoulders and down his arms is what brought that to mind.

He keeps splashing around, battling the apples. The plastic pool is wide. No matter how many times he tries to bite the apple, it smoothly escapes.

“Imai-kun… Maybe it would be easier to aim for the bottom?” I suggest as he brings his head up.

When he tries to scoop up a particularly delicious looking apple, gravity claims his prize as it falls back into the pool. In the end, he manages to bite into an apple on his fourth attempt.

“Okay, looks like you’re just friends!”

“Nobody can do it that easily!” Imai-kun retorts. Ranka is laughing at him.

I feel bad for him, I hope his unrequited love comes true.

“Now then… I’m going to give it a try.”

“Really? Are you sure, Yuriko?” Ranka asks, sounding worried.

“I really wanted to do it.”

I carefully inspect the apples in the pool. Apparently it was sponsored by a few different farms, so there’s various types of apples. My favourite apples are crunchy ones like fuji and jonagold, but I think a softer apple would be better for this. They’re all fresh, so they’ll all have some amount of crispness, but I’ll aim for the ones that will be softer relative to the others. The top parts of all of them look firm and well ripened. I take a deep breath in, and plunge my head into the pool.

“Fwah!”

First attempt is a failure. As soon as I tried to bite one, it slipped away. How frustrating. Once again, I take a breath and dunk my face into the water. This time, I resolve myself to go deeper… And press a soft apple firmly against the bottom of the pool while I sink my teeth into it. With a firm grip on the apple, I pull my head up.

“Ohh! Congrats! That’s the first time today that someone’s gotten it on their second try,” the attendant says, clapping for me.

I’m happy, but also embarrassed… But I did it on my second attempt. My love will stay unrequited for a little longer… As we leave

the tent so they can close down, I remember something important.

"Ah… I forgot my mom's souvenir."

She asked me to bring her back a cake. I hurry over to where the sweets were being sold, but it's too late. They're all closed.

"That's a shame. It can't be helped, though. I'll buy her one tomorrow to make up for it." Ranka pats my back to make me feel better.

"Oh!" Imai-kun mumbles as if he just noticed something.

"Huh? Imai?! Why are you here? The stores are already closed," Tatewaki-kun calls out to us with a puzzled look on his face after noticing we seem troubled.

"What are you doing here, Tatewaki?"

"I had kind of a… part time job, I guess? A lot happened. I was helping out at Mad Tea Party. Shouko-san knows the owner."

"Really?!" Ranka says in surprise.

That's been Ranka's favourite store lately.

"Lucky! Wait, actually, we came here because Yuriko needed to buy a cake, but it looks like we're too late…"

"Oh, then I'll give you some of mine. I got them as a reward for helping out. I have roll cakes and mont blancs."

"Really?!"

I forget all about the awkwardness between us and rush to the cakes. Today was chaotic, but at least it ended well. The teddy bear, cakes, and apple bobbing all had a happy ending.

"You seem like you had fun. I'm relieved to see you're doing well."

"Well… It wasn't all fun and games." Tatewaki-kun smiles as he hands me the box of cakes.

"I would never give up my cake to someone else, even to Naoe," a voice says from behind me.

It's Sakurako-san. Not even to Naoe? I start laughing, but I notice that Tatewaki-kun looks down at the ground sadly. Tatewaki-kun is an idiot, so why does he still get to stay by Sakurako-san's side? I wish he'd give up and leave her, but I know better than anyone why he doesn't.

“...I wish I could give you something as thanks, but all I have right now is this apple.”

“An apple, huh? Can I have it?”

It looks delicious. His eyes light up as soon as I show it to him.

“But since I won it from a game, it already has a bite mark in it…”

I guess if you washed it and cut off that part, you could still eat it… He laughs and says, “I don’t mind, it’s just a bite mark. I mean, it’s not like you put poison or laxatives in it, right?”

“I’m not Snow white’s stepmother!”

How long has it been since we last had a silly conversation like this? Besides the times we talk to keep up appearances in front of everyone else. I offer him the apple, which he happily accepts. My apple of unrequited love. I wonder if his wish will come true, some day. Even if it doesn’t… I hope that he can stay by Sakurako-san’s side for just a little longer.

“Oh, this is seriously good,” he says, smiling widely as he bites into the apple.

It’s been a long time since he’s smiled at me like that. On that day, I told him I loved him and he didn’t even notice. My love will stay unrequited for a while longer. That’s fine, though. It’s better than being rejected. Just being by his side is enough. But first, I have to apologise to him properly. We have to talk about his secret that I found out, so he can have peace of mind.

After a bit more chatting and commotion, we walk back through the shopping park. Sakurako-san recounts the tales of her valour from today. It sounds like the two of them had a good day, all in all. Sakurako-san was cool, too.

“...Oh yeah. Can I stop by somewhere before heading home? I just… Have someone I want to thank.”

On the way back, the lights from the mall come into view, reminding me of Ishizuka-san. I want to thank him for his help, but more than that, I want to tell him we found the teddy bear, and that the older sister is taking steps toward her own happiness.

“Ishizuka isn’t here anymore,”

The woman at the customer service desk says with a troubled expression after I explain why I'm here.

"Huh? Oh… Are you able to give me his contact information, then?" Did he go home for the day already?

"I can look into it if you'd like, but… He won't be able to meet you."

"Why?" I ask, tilting my head to the side.

"I'm so sorry, he was a good person," the woman says with a sigh. "I was told it was a heart attack… Oh, today is exactly 49 days since his passing."

"...Huh?"

What?? I can't find the words to reply for a moment.

"That can't be… After all… What? I just talked to him a few hours ago…"

"I can put you in contact with the bereaved family, if you'd like?"

"No… Um… Actually… No, I'm fine."

I notice that I've been slowly backing away from the counter without realising it. That can't possibly be true. I'm sure this woman is just mistaken. That has to be it. But then, what if I look into it and find out he really is gone…? A chill climbs up my spine. She… Must be lying. It's impossible. Ghosts can't exist. But what if he's had regrets about not finding that teddy bear all this time, and turned into a ghost because of that…?

"Nope. It's not possible. Halloween came from overseas. When people die in Japan, they only come back during Obon."

Right, Halloween has nothing to do with us. Telling myself that, I hurry back to the streets overflowing with orange monsters, to where everyone is waiting.

## Epilogue

On the day of the first snowfall, which came 9 days later than usual, I visit the usual tea shop with Kougami for the first time in a while. As if to apologise for the delay, Jack Frost has been working hard to paint the entire city white. It looks like the snow will stick

around for a while, too. In the past several years, the snow has started earlier and finished earlier.

“The snow… It's pretty incredible, huh?” Kougami murmurs while looking through the window.

“Yeah…” I reply. We fall back into silence again.

Kougami promised not to tell anyone about my suicide note, but she doesn’t have the original copy. Hanabusa still has it. In other words, he can use it to manipulate me whenever he feels like it. That fact is horrifying. That’s not all. I absolutely cannot let Sakurako-san find out about it.

“It might be weird for me to tell you ‘it’ll be okay,’ but… With the way you wrote it, I don’t think Sakurako-san would even realise how you feel, Tatewaki-kun.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. It’s Sakurako-san, after all.”

She makes a good point. I don’t think Sakurako-san would be able to infer the words I wanted to write but couldn’t. I have a feeling that Hanabusa would be able to forge my writing and complete the note, though.

“Anyway, there’s something that I’ve been curious about for a while… The Swallow and the person working with him seem to know you and Sakurako-san really well. They knew in advance that it was Ii-chan’s little brother’s birthday, and that the two of you were invited.”

“...Huh?” My hand that I’m using to hold my tea cup trembles.

“That can’t be true. Hardly anyone other than Sakurako-san and I knew about it.”

Only Ii-chan’s family, my mom, and Utsumi-san knew. But the only way for their plan to work would be to know that we’d be at that exact place at that time,

“But in that case… Hanabusa would be-”

“No, wait. That’s not what I meant… I thought that Sakurako-san’s house could be bugged with a wiretap or something.”

“Hm?”

“At least, that’s how it seemed when I was half asleep and listening to their conversation… At the very least, they seem to know a lot about Sakurako-san.”

“There is no wiretap,” Sakurako-san says.

I called her to tell her about my conversation with Kougami, and she showed up at the store 10 minutes later.

“But…”

“I already looked into that about a year ago, when I was worried that he was trying to manipulate me.”

It must have been when Sakurako-san almost killed Sanroku, the drug addicted man. She must have figured that Hanabusa knew too much about Soutarou-kun.

“I’ve also changed out all the locks in the house. It would be unrealistic for someone to break in while nobody is home.”

Apparently her locks are the latest model, which combine several different kinds of locks, so that it takes a long time to pick them. Sakurako-san admits that it’s not impossible to break in, but just unlikely.

“Someone could have gotten in after you checked, though. They also could have placed a listening device after you let them in as a guest,” Kougami says quietly.

“But… It’s not like there’s that many people it could be, still.”

I look at Sakurako-san, and she nods at me. Only people who are close to her are allowed into her bone-filled living room.

“The Swallow is more cunning than you think. You should really check again,” Kougami says forcefully, unswayed by Sakurako-san’s denial.

She’s standing her ground. I feel strangely uncomfortable with Kougami’s behaviour- or perhaps I should say this change in her. The Kougami I used to know would never push her opinion so strongly. For better or for worse, she was gentle. Sakurako-san seems to notice this change in Kougami, too. She reluctantly agrees to contact a security company about looking for listening devices.

A man named Ashida-san from the security company looks for any devices in the car. At the start, Kougami and I were skeptical . My heart drops when the rustling sound coming from Ashida-san’s machine gradually turns into the sound of gran humming a song from an all-male idol group she’s into.

“...Looks like there is one,” Ashida-san says.

It’s probably in the living room. Ashida-san points out that it was likely an acquaintance that put it there.

“The only people with a key to the house are gran, Ms. Shouko, Naoe, and I. I completely trust Ms. Shouko, and Naoe wouldn’t use a method that would be so easily traced back to him… I guess that man really is someone I know,” Sakurako-san says with a long, long sigh.

In the past year, Hanabusa or one of his allies was inside of her house. And it was someone we know.

“Kougami, you said that the culprit has long hair, right? There are only a few people with long hair that have visited your house- Aoba-san, for one.”

After Ashida-san leaves, I can’t help but voice my anxiety and doubts.

Kougami seems to agree with me.

“That’s not possible,” Sakurako-san says sternly. “He’s different. Since you doubted him, I investigated him the whole time we were in Sapporo. Above that, my uncle trusts him. Aoba-san is definitely not a murderer.”

“But Hanabusa doesn’t commit murder himself.”

“So you’re doubting my uncle?”

“Your uncle can make mistakes. He’s not God.”

“He might as well be to me.”

“Sakurako-san…”

Sakurako-san crosses her arms. That means she doesn’t want to talk to me anymore. I want to believe in them, too. Both in her uncle, and in Aoba-san. Especially now that I’ve decided to pursue a career in forensic medicine.

“But we can’t get in contact with Yamaji-san, either. If we refuse to suspect the people close to us, we won’t be able to anticipate the next victim. Think about it for a minute- even Kougami was one of his pawns for a while.”

The pure, white snow gently falls. By the time these large flakes turn into powdery snow, someone’s blood might be spilled again. There aren’t any butterflies out in November, but Hanabusa’s butterflies are still fluttering around. The rowan berries on the white

road almost look like blood stains. What can I do to protect Sakurako-san?